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Faith in Action for Social Justice

relentless hope

prophetic
imagination
in a time
of despair

by Kenyatta R. Gilbert

PLUS:

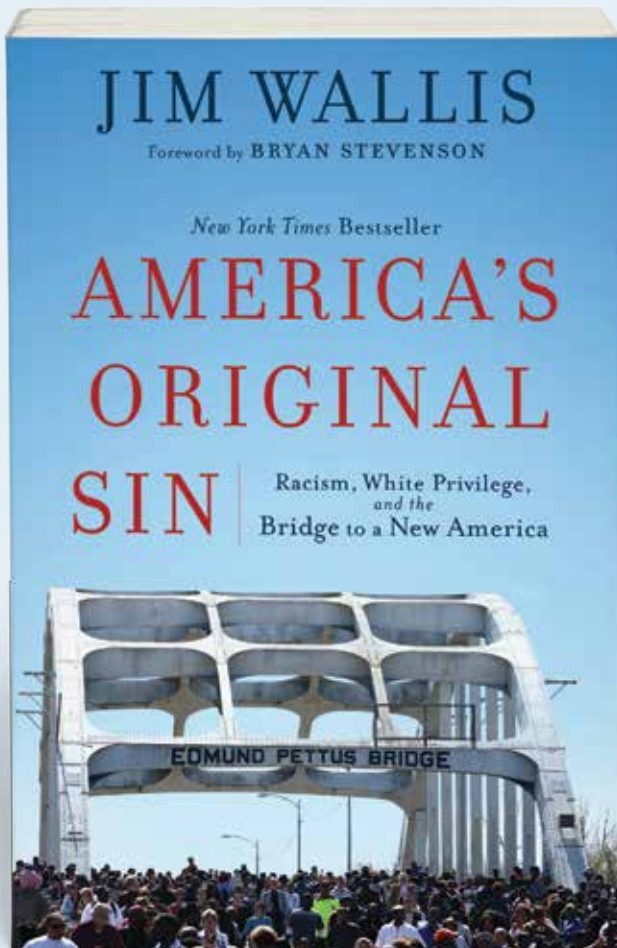
A conversation with Walter Brueggemann

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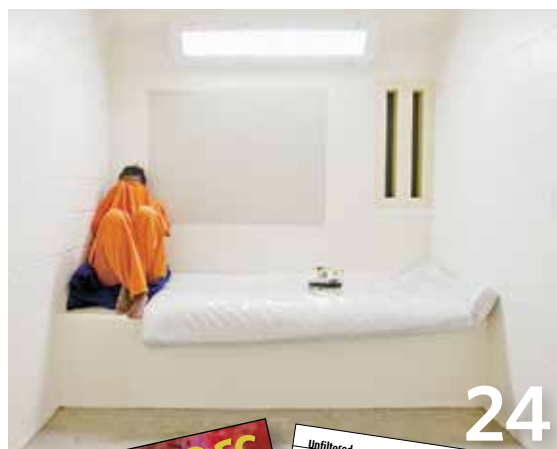
—**BRYAN STEVENSON**, author of *Just Mercy* (from the foreword)



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by Kenyatta R. Gilbert

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IN WALTER BRUEGGEMANN'S first article for *Sojourners*, published in November 1983, he described the “radical break” we prepare for in Advent as “the Bible’s effort to break our imagination.”

In the decades that followed, Brueggemann’s keen analysis of scripture has called out some of the darkest practices of American empire, including consumerism, gun violence, financial corruption, environmental exploitation, and sexual assault. But while he’s never shied from speaking truth to power, Brueggemann has repeatedly emphasized that the core of the prophetic vocation isn’t merely to rebuke unjust systems, but rather, as he wrote in

1983, “to think a genuinely new thought, to dream of a genuinely new world that will displace the old failed one.”

This call to replace the mind-numbing vision of empire with a radical vision of God’s kingdom is the subject of Brueggemann’s best-known work, which celebrates its 40th anniversary in 2018: *The Prophetic Imagination*. In this issue, we asked Howard University Divinity School’s Kenyatta R. Gilbert, who focuses on the theory and practice of African-American preaching, to revisit Brueggemann’s classic work, listening for the resonances between



Walter Brueggemann

the biblical prophets and prophetic voices of today. Building on Brueggemann’s work, Gilbert finds that prophetic imagination is alive and well—sometimes in places far from church pulpits.

As we enter a new year, this is the challenge we all face: to use imagination, creativity, and resourceful perseverance to confront a culture hell-bent on obscuring the reality of human suffering, if not actively furthering it—while never forgetting that Jesus shows us the way to a hope-filled and life-giving alternative. ■

Letters

Truthful Plaques

Did Presidents Washington and Jefferson practice what they preached? Jim Wallis’ November 2017 editorial, “White ‘Heritage’ vs. the Gospel,” suggests an alternative to tearing down monuments: educational plaques stating the historical truth. I agree. Here are my suggested plaques for the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial. The Washington Monument: First president, father of our country, led American Revolution which won freedom from British tyranny. Misused this freedom to continue practicing tyranny over black slaves. The Jefferson Memorial: Third president, authored Declaration of Independence which proclaimed all men are created equal. Proclaimed equality but practiced rich, white, male superiority.

Lowell Noble
Riceville, Iowa

Needing More than a Sermon

While what Jim Wallis says in “White ‘Heritage’ vs. the Gospel” talks to the issue of racism, he has not spoken to the most important issue the church should be addressing: the hundreds of years of preaching and teaching that defined Africans and others as not fully human. These centuries of defending slavery and slave wages cannot be overcome in the few years since the 1950s by just an occasional sermon or resolution.

William Dodge
Schenectady, New York

Centuries of defending slavery cannot be overcome by an occasional sermon.

A Hard Parable

This is regarding Wil Gafney’s November 2017 reflection (“Living the Word”) on the wise and foolish virgins. I appreciate the author’s perspective, but in fact the parable does not chide the wise virgins for their attitude of scarcity or refusal to share. It simply says that they were admitted to the kingdom and the others were not. Wisdom in the Bible is associated with virtue and foolishness with sin. This is a hard parable, and I kind of wish it had been told differently, but the way I read it, the meaning is plain.

Cheryl Kopec
Tacoma, Washington

Luxury of Circumstance

Reading my sister Jenna Barnett’s interviews in her November 2017 article (“Neither Angels Nor Demons”) reminded me that my resilience is a product not only of my hard work, the support of friends, mental health professionals, and time, but also the luxury of circumstance that my socioeconomic status affords me. Abuse within the context of our economically polarized nation and our very flawed juvenile punitive justice system

serves to punish victims and perpetuate cycles of abuse. Everyone deserves, but does not currently have, the same opportunities to be able to rise above and beyond their abuse to find joy in life, love, and careers. Let’s begin a deep and broad dialogue about the systems in our society that overlook and even encourage such abuses.

Erin Barnett
Brooklyn, New York

Love in Correction

In “Love in Action,” a sidebar about my book *Just Call Me Jerzy: Popieluszko in the United States and Canada* in the September-October 2017 issue, the phrase “speaks bravely to thousands in Poland and Canada” is incorrect. Popieluszko did indeed speak bravely to tens of thousands in Poland, but that never happened in Canada.

Judith Kelly
Arlington, Virginia

Répondez s’il vous plaît. Write to letters@sojo.net or Letters, *Sojourners*, 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited.

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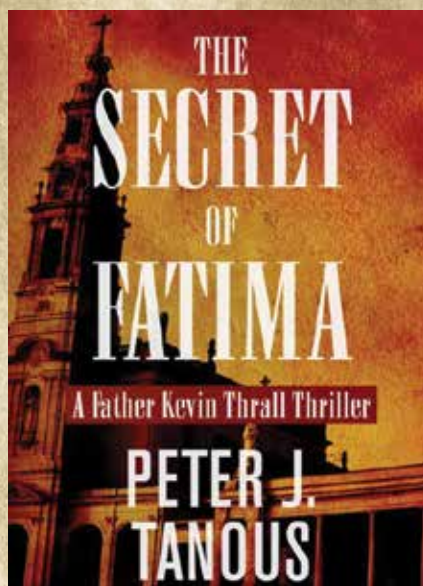


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BY JIM WALLIS

Our Task for the Year Ahead



THIS HAS BEEN quite a year for the United States, for the world, and for us as a faith-based organization. The election of Donald Trump, in addition to being traumatic for all those affected by or deeply concerned about racial bigotry and sexual assault, has created an ongoing national emergency that started a year ago and shows no sign of ending anytime soon.

Yet it has also brought people together in defense of vulnerable people around the principles of Matthew 25—treating the hungry, thirsty, sick, stranger, and prisoner as we would treat Jesus Christ himself.

We have been particularly focused this year on protecting immigrants from deportation, people of color from racialized policing

obscure the truth, or even render it irrelevant.

Meanwhile, overt white supremacists were as emboldened and brazen in their behavior as they have been in several decades, and the covert white supremacy that lies beneath the institutions of American life has been revealed again and again. Many liberal white people could scarcely believe their eyes as they watched white supremacists wielding torches and waving KKK and Nazi flags march through the streets of Charlottesville, Va., on a Friday night; their faces exposed for all to see, chanting vile anti-Semitic slogans including “Jews will not replace us!” and the Nazi phrase “blood and soil!” People of color, who experience America’s original sin of systemic racism every day, were frightened, but not as surprised.

After anti-racist activist Heather Heyer was killed the next day by one of the white supremacists, many of us were horrified as President Trump equivocated about the evil and the “very fine people” on both sides. For more than four decades, Sojourners has sought to stand up against racism, and that mission tragically was just as painfully timely in 2017 as it was at our founding in 1971.

EACH YEAR DURING Advent we await the coming of Christ into the world. This is not a passive process of waiting for something to happen. It’s an active, hopeful preparing that we do in gratitude for the gift of the Incarnation, for God becoming flesh and living among us.

What does the coming of Christ mean for us today? What is the call of biblical justice for the least, last, and lost that resonates at the end of this turbulent, exhausting, and often traumatic year?

We need to believe again, in the

face of trauma, that the promise of Christ’s coming and the redemption of humanity and God’s creation is for all people, in good times and bad, in times of peace and times of war, in times of prosperity and in times of poverty. But building the reign of God on Earth “as it is in heaven” is a mission that involves all of us as instruments of God’s will. Jesus came to save us from our sins, to love and change the world, and to teach us to respond in gratitude by living out God’s call for social justice in building God’s reign in the here and now, even as we await Christ’s return.

In a time such as this, the clear instruction of Matthew 25 to protect the marginalized has never been more important. As we celebrate at Christmas Jesus’ arrival into the world, we also look ahead to what will be required of us in 2018 and beyond.

In addition to continuing to protect those now most vulnerable, we must be ready to extend that protection to any who are threatened or targeted in 2018. We must continue to let Christ’s light of truth shine in a national discourse that continues to be poisoned with lies from the highest levels of worldly power. We should recognize the value of democratic institutions and the rule of law when they are used to protect human freedom, correct injustice, and lift people out of poverty. We must remain vigilant and push back against the erosion of norms and practices that separate our democracy from autocracy and oppression.

Perhaps most important, this year, like every year, we must renew our commitment to building a society and world for everyone, who are all beloved of God—no exceptions. Come, Lord Jesus. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine.

What does the coming of Christ mean for us today?

and criminal-justice systems, and Muslims from religious persecution and an Islamophobic “ban.” We also mobilized successfully with a broad coalition of faith-based and secular groups to protect access to affordable health care for tens of millions of Americans.

More broadly, this past year will be remembered as a clash between truth and lies, and as a struggle between those striving for inclusion and multiculturalism and the resurgent forces of white supremacy. The year was bookended by lies, from claims about inauguration crowds and supposed voter fraud to more serious mistruths about Trump campaign connections with Russia, with many lies in between.

In that context, Sojourners has sought to uphold the value of truth in a climate where the president, his team, and his allies in right-wing media have sought to conceal and

French artist JR installed in September a 70-foot-tall image of Kikito, a 1-year-old boy from the city of Tecate, looking over the infamous border wall between Mexico and the United States.



Photo courtesy of the artist JR

By Richard Rohr

A Light from Nowhere

Mass shootings, climate crises, rumors of war—are we in a collective state of post-traumatic stress?

AFTER YEARS OF retreat work and spiritual direction in many contexts, I have come to see that it is very hard to heal individuals or institutions when the larger culture itself is in shock or despair. If there is at least some level of cultural hope or optimism, the healing process moves much easier and creativity flourishes.

When the shades are all pulled down, and so many are content to live in a dark room, it is much harder to enlighten any one part of the room. The shared panic makes high-level responses much more difficult. (Yet, to be honest, it emboldens the rare few too!)

I hope this does not sound too clever or current, but I do believe that much of the world, and surely the United States, is presently in a state of collective post-traumatic stress. We sit stunned by what is happening around us, to us, on our newsfeeds—thrashing around for explanations

and answers—inside of incoherence at so many levels. I guess St. John of the Cross would call it a “dark night of the soul,” but it’s not an individual experience. We are now in it together.

The 1960s was also an era of upheaval, both in the U.S. and around the world. We were also torn apart. But underlying it all

Poets and seers insist on a compelling hope.

was a historic hope, real reform, revolution, and transformation at many levels. It seemed like an advance of consciousness. Theology, psychology, critical thinking, cultural studies—all made huge advances in a very short period. For those of us in the Catholic fold, it was summed up in the prescient and revolutionary documents of Vatican II. A light from nowhere, it seemed! Yet even this

totally unexpected reform set up a subtle but real backlash, as we saw in the wavering of the next two popes. Then, 50 years later, Pope Francis appeared. Again, a light from nowhere.

Western cultures are waiting and hoping for another light from nowhere. Christians would call this grace. Theorists would call it the “x factor.” Poets and seers would insist on an undeniable and compelling hope, which they themselves do not understand. This is the warp and woof of history, one line moving us horizontally and at length, and the other, vertical lines that hold it all together in some kind of coherence and meaningful pattern.

Chaos wearies the mind and the heart—and surely the body, too, as we see in the opioid crisis and spikes in mental and emotional illness. At every level, we are in search for some solid ground. We need it for our health.

Our Mission

The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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Of course, this search can move toward authoritarian “saviors” and demagoguery, toward deep cynicism and withdrawal into an isolated selfhood, toward all kinds of false transcendence, like success or war. But it can also move toward bursts and breakthroughs in consciousness and spirit that will chart a new course. I see it all around me now in new forms of action and contemplation.

We are in such an in-between time right now. To use Samuel Beckett’s metaphor, we are surely “waiting for Godot,” who has not yet fully appeared. And we do not even

know in which direction to look.

This is called the “liminal space,” the threshold space between two rooms. We have left one room and have not yet entered the other room. I am convinced that all in-depth transformation takes place in such liminal space, when no one person is in control, but only a larger force guides the way. ■

Richard Rohr, OFM, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (cac.org), lives in Albuquerque, N.M., and is a Sojourners contributing editor.

By Faith-Marie Zamblé

The End of Title IX?

Students have led efforts to reframe the conversation around gender-based violence.

SECRETARY OF Education Betsy DeVos this fall weakened laws that make campuses safer places for students to live and learn—particularly protections from sexual harassment. “[T]he system established by the prior administration,” DeVos said, “has failed too many students.”

DeVos is targeting Title IX, the landmark 1972 legislation to prevent gender-based discrimination in college athletics. Over time, Title IX was strengthened by the addition of the Jeanne Clery Act, a federal mandate requiring schools to be more transparent about their handling of sexual-assault cases and more proactive in efforts to change campus attitudes regarding predatory behavior.

Most controversial of these additions was the Campus Sexual Violence Act, a 2013 update that broadened the Clery Act to include all forms of sexual violence, including stalking, dating violence, and other such behavior. In 2011 and 2014, during the Obama era, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights elevated and regularized the standard of evidence required by universities receiving federal funds in how they respond to sexual assault allegations—a move that provided students greater

protection and a more-transparent process.

After months of dropping hints, DeVos, an evangelical Christian, rescinded the Obama-era standards in September, returning “choice” to universities in how they handle sexual assault allegations, lowering the standard of evidence, removing time limits for resolving cases, and potentially opening the door to endless appeals by the accused while closing the appeals process to the accuser. Her argument is that this “interim guidance” will eventually be replaced by new federal regulations.

Advocacy groups for accused students rejoiced, claiming that the Obama-era policies skewed toward complainants—even though less than one-third of students found responsible for sexual assaults were expelled.

Christian colleges have remained oddly silent about DeVos’ moves. Since the inception of Title IX, at least 38 of them have asked for and received exemptions from the policy. Others have refused government funds, citing (rightly) that lack of federal money equals lack of responsibility for compliance.

Many schools—Christian and secular—have taken it upon themselves to develop

Christian colleges have been oddly silent about DeVos’ actions to dismantle protections for victims of sexual assault.

From the Archives

Jan-Feb 2001

The God Beat

PEOPLE OF faith want to see the media recognize via news coverage that religious expression is a significant American trait. “They want to see religion mainstreamed in the newspaper,” said Stewart Hoover, a University of Colorado expert on religion in the news. When it comes to churches, however, the feelings are mixed, according to a pivotal 1989 study by Hoover. Like other institutions, church bodies want to maintain control over descriptions of their symbols and stories, yet many also desire the validation and credibility conferred by appearing in the news. But going public with their news and views runs the risk of misinterpretation by journalists. ...



How will religion be perceived in 21st-century America? Alliances have been shifting: For a time it was denomination vs. denomination. Now, on social-cultural issues, it's conservative Catholic, evangelical, and Orthodox Jewish allies vs. various bedfellow liberals. Tomorrow, I believe, we will see “believers” (Christian, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Hindu, New Age) vs. “non-believers” (atheists, agnostics, free thinkers, secularists, areligious) attracting news attention.

If religious literacy continues to slide, then editors and producers may feel that religion specialists are unnecessary. Religious nuances might seem irrelevant when all one needs to know is if a group's members are believers or nonbelievers. ■

John Dart, author of Deities and Deadlines, covered religion for three decades for The Los Angeles Times.

sexual assault policies that provide safety, justice, and appropriate transparency on their campuses, policies that meet the federal standards and go beyond. In many cases, these are student-led efforts.

Centre College, a Presbyterian-affiliated liberal arts school in Kentucky, has created an online Sexual Misconduct and Assault Reporting Tool (SMART) to make a potentially intimidating reporting process clearer and easier. Students at North Park University, a Christian school in Chicago, have staged guerilla art installations about sexual assault and assisted in rewriting aspects of the student handbook as it pertains to sexual misconduct and abuse of power.

These efforts are important for reframing the conversation around gender-based violence and misogyny. But they cannot replace strong federal policy.

Christian colleges can model leadership by embracing transparency and accountability. After all, there is a biblical mandate for

doing so. In Matthew 10, Jesus tells his disciples, “nothing is concealed that will not be uncovered, or hidden that will not be made known.” This applies to sexual assault and attempts to cover it up.

Christian institutions of higher learning ought to be places where students do not have to weigh their experiences of harassment or assault against their school's concern for its reputation, where all are understood to be whole and holy in God's sight, and where violent or aggressive behavior is dealt with smartly, swiftly, and appropriately. That's what Christian witness looks like.

If the Trump administration dismantles Title IX, colleges and universities will be faced with a choice: protect vulnerable students or promote a system of higher education in which boys become men and men become Harvey Weinstein. ■

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an editorial assistant for Sojourners.

By Susan Talve

Throw Open the Doors

In St. Louis, a Jewish congregation stands against police brutality.

THE MORNING FORMER police officer Jason Stockley was found not guilty of the premeditated first-degree murder of Anthony Lamar Smith, the St. Louis justice community was ready.

We had learned many lessons since 18-year-old Michael Brown was killed by a white police officer on the streets of nearby Ferguson three years earlier. The formal protests after Brown's killing lasted more than 400 days—but the movement grew through courageous conversations about race, class, and the use of racial profiling. Our synagogue provided sanctuary for protesters and joined with other religious communities in the deep work of justice and healing. We registered voters and supported African Americans and allies for elected office who would prioritize key issues: demilitarizing police, improving police training and accountability, breaking the school-to-prison pipeline, challenging mass incarceration, and dismantling systemic white supremacy.

As the Stockley verdict drew near, we announced that our congregation would again be a sanctuary for protesters. In addition, we gathered with clergy to prepare for our role as supporters and de-escalators when protests started.

Our synagogue, Central Reform Congregation, was founded 33 years ago to be a presence in St. Louis, which was losing its last Jewish congregation to white flight. We have taken our role in the city seriously. Today we are a racially and economically integrated Jewish community that has earned its place at the table of fighting racial disparities in our community by showing up.

The Ferguson uprising drew clergy into the streets. We showed up, listened, and took supporting roles to earn the trust of the young leaders. We learned that our buildings have a role. Central Reform Congregation became a designated sanctuary, along with many other churches in the region. We recruited volunteers to stay

through the night, stocked the kitchen with water and snacks, set up phone-recharging stations, and laid in supplies to respond to tear gas and pepper spray. We made a commitment that law enforcement looking for protesters would not be allowed into our building without a warrant.

On Friday, Sept. 15, Officer Stockley was found not guilty in the murder of Anthony Lamar Smith. I asked the church across the street if they would open their doors early because our congregation would be in prayer until 9 p.m. for Shabbat services. As our worship concluded we saw hundreds of peaceful protesters marching down our street. We met their chants with cheers.

In a moment, everything changed. Scores of police in military garb surrounded the crowd, firing tear gas canisters and rubber bullets. With nowhere to go, protesters poured into our synagogue and the neighboring church. We pulled them in and promised to keep them safe. Concern over property damage may have prompted the aggressive police response, but in our sanctuary, the protesters were our guests and were treated with respect.

Hate groups seized this opportunity to stir up more violence, challenging the police to violate the sanctuary and “gas the synagogue.” This truly horrifying slogan began circulating as a hashtag on Twitter, along with other racist and anti-Jewish statements.

On the day Stockley was acquitted, the frontline resistance this time included elected officials. The growing resistance continues to put economic pressure on the region. Demands for police accountability have dramatically increased—including among business owners and white allies—especially considering the lawsuits following the excessive use of tear gas and brutal arrests of more than 300 nonviolent protesters.

The night peaceful protesters filled our street and faced violent backlash was the night our space truly became a sacred sanctuary, a shelter of peace, reclaiming the relevance of our institution and making real our prayers for justice. ■

Susan Talve is the founding rabbi of Central Reform Congregation, the only Jewish congregation in St. Louis.

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VIDEO



J.P. Keenan

Fighting Against Fear

Fear has been on the rise since the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. No one knows this better, perhaps, than African Americans, immigrants, and Muslims. Sadly, this year we saw how quickly words of hate can turn into violence. Join us in pledging to protect and defend vulnerable people in the name of Jesus, in the words of Matthew 25: "I was a stranger, and you invited me in ..." Watch the video at sojo.net/vulnerable.

QUOTED

“Our segregated churches are direct descendants of the history of slavery and its racist ideology.”

—Samuel Son
on racial division in U.S. churches
sojo.net/segregation

NEWS



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Churches and #MeToo

After the #MeToo hashtag flooded social media, Eugene Hung challenged men to stop viewing sexual harassment and assault as a “women’s issue.” “No, men, it is *our* issue,” wrote Hung. “We are the main cause. We need to own it, take responsibility for it, and change the way we teach and model masculinity for boys and men so that this evil stops.”

He also challenged the church to be part of the response. “Churches should begin by addressing sexual violence in the first place,” Hung, a former pastor, wrote. “Most, in my experience, don’t deal with the issue at all.” Here are some of his suggestions for churches responding to the #MeToo campaign:

- Address sexual violence on a regular basis. Such efforts should start from the pulpit but should also be a part of Sunday school lessons and small group discussions.
- Do not neglect biblical passages that describe sexual violence. This includes Genesis 19, 34, and 39; Judges 19-21; and 2 Samuel 11 and 13.
- Bring more women into upper levels of leadership. Churches that are mostly led by men will be less likely to prioritize sexual violence as a matter that they must actively engage.
- Refuse to be party to conspiracies of silence. Those who pressure victims to keep quiet—and who work to protect the image of the violator and the church—end up enabling further sexual violence.

Read more at sojo.net/responsibility.



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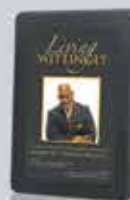
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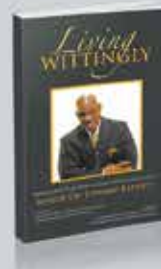
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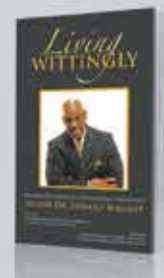
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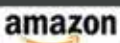
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The Poison of Prejudice

A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY relies on the contributions of its citizens in everything from launching technology companies to managing the PTA. Discrimination against an identity group in a democratic society is not just a violation of its dignity, it is a barrier to its contribution.

The contributions of Muslims to American civilization are impressive and wide-ranging, captured well in the speech President Barack Obama gave in Cairo on June 4, 2009. “American Muslims have enriched the United States. They have fought in our wars, served in government, stood for civil rights, started businesses, taught at our universities, excelled in our sports arenas, won Nobel Prizes, built our tallest building, and lit the Olympic Torch.”

But the atmosphere of Islamophobia in the Trump era has created special hardships for Muslims, a dynamic that hurts



Reuters

mate, the senior communications adviser of the National Security Council, Michael Anton, as she departed: “I told him I had to leave because it was an insult walking into this country’s most historic building every day under an administration that is working against and vilifying everything I stand for as an American and as a Muslim.” It was only later that she found out that Anton had written that Islam was “incompatible with the modern West.”

Prejudice does internal damage to identity that is hard to see but is pernicious. Social theorist Charles Taylor points out that identity development is a highly complex and fraught process. Our identities are formed in an ongoing dialogue between our own self-perception and the manners in which we are perceived and represented by others. Taylor writes in “The Politics of Recognition” that “a person or group can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.” Misrecognition, he writes, “can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred.”

I am negotiating this right now as a father who wants his two Muslim sons to grow up feeling proud of being Muslim and committed to making

a contribution to the various communities to which they belong. Highlighting Muslim artists is one way I do this, so when a band of Muslim musicians from Mali, called Tinariwen, announced a stop at a local music venue, I excitedly showed my 10-year-old a poster advertising the show. The image depicted smiling men holding musical instruments and wearing the traditional garb of their local desert region: flowing robes and head wraps.

“What are you doing, Dad?” my son exclaimed. “That’s ISIS.”

Somehow, a 10-year-old boy—raised in a liberal Muslim household, in a multicultural, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Chicago, surrounded by authority figures who know and affirm his Muslim identity, sent to a progressive Muslim religious education program where inspiring stories about Islam make up the curriculum, exposed to a wide range of positive Muslim role models—still, upon seeing dark men dressed in robes and head wraps, instinctively associates them with terrorists.

Prejudice is a poison. Sometimes it is evident and you can point it out.

Other times it is imperceptible, but it works its way into your system and does its damage just the same. ■



Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes about social justice from his perspective as a Muslim American.

Prejudice does internal damage to identity that is hard to see but is pernicious.

both the Muslim community and the nation to which they seek to contribute.

Take, for example, Rumana Ahmed, a hijab-wearing Muslim woman who worked for President Obama’s National Security Council and chose to remain in her position after the election as part of what she viewed as a patriotic duty to help a new administration—even one that she vehemently disagreed with—transition from the strident rhetoric of campaigning to the nuanced challenges of governing. After watching what she considered to be Islamophobic and un-American policies take shape within the first week of the administration, she resigned.

In an essay for *The Atlantic*, she described what she told her office

Innocent until proven guilty.

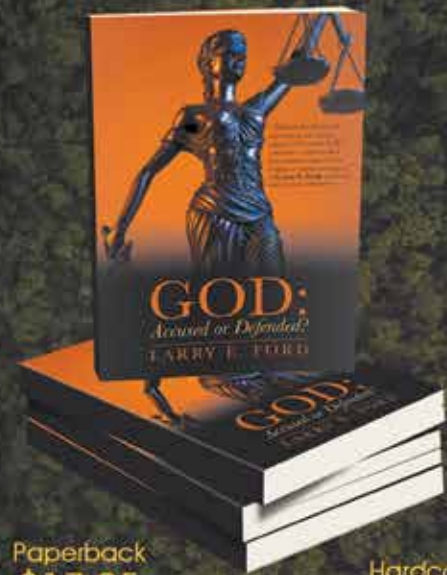
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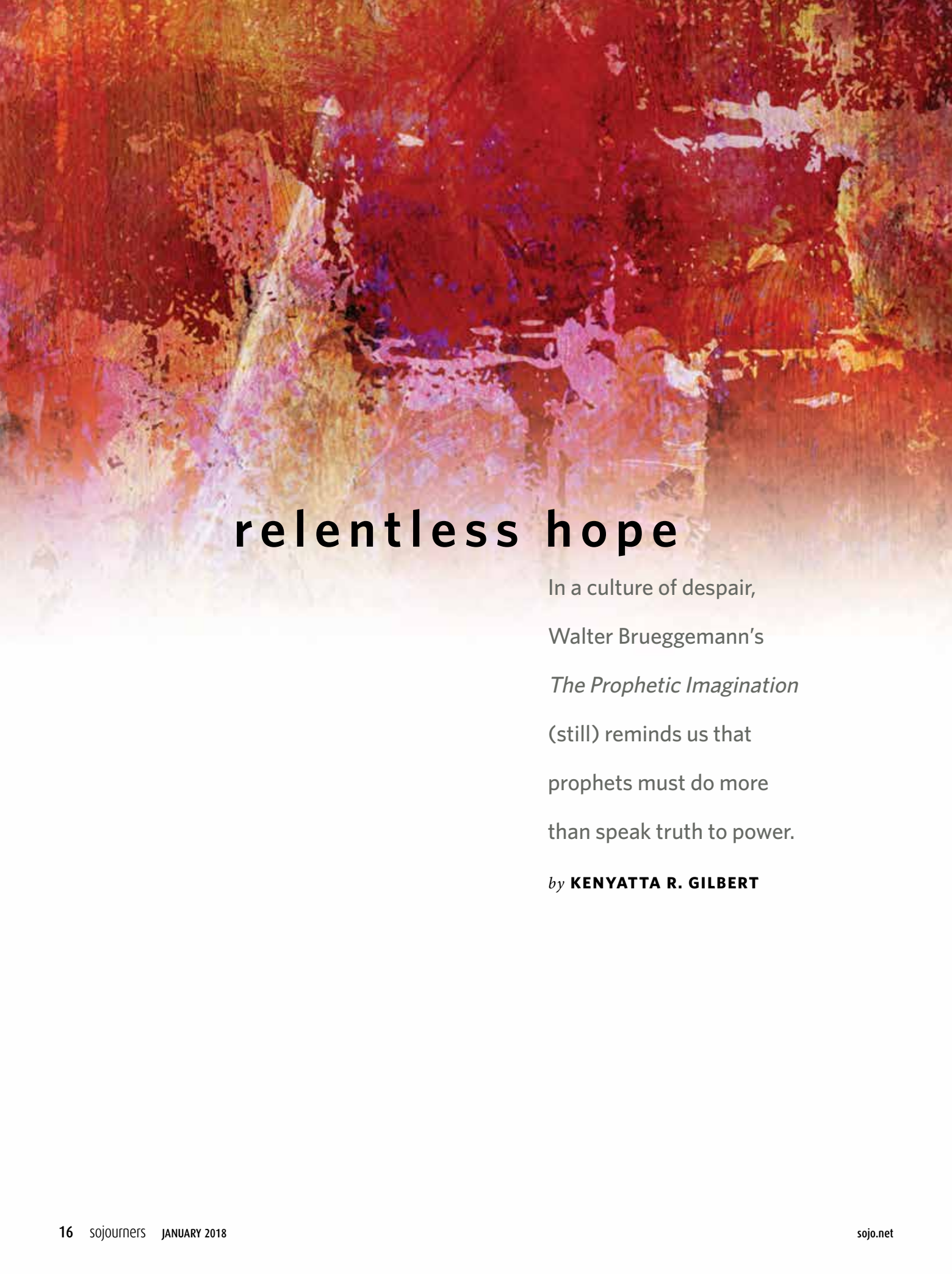
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1. Gothic thinkers laid steps to reform. In 1517 Luther climbed the steps and crossed the threshold to Reformation.
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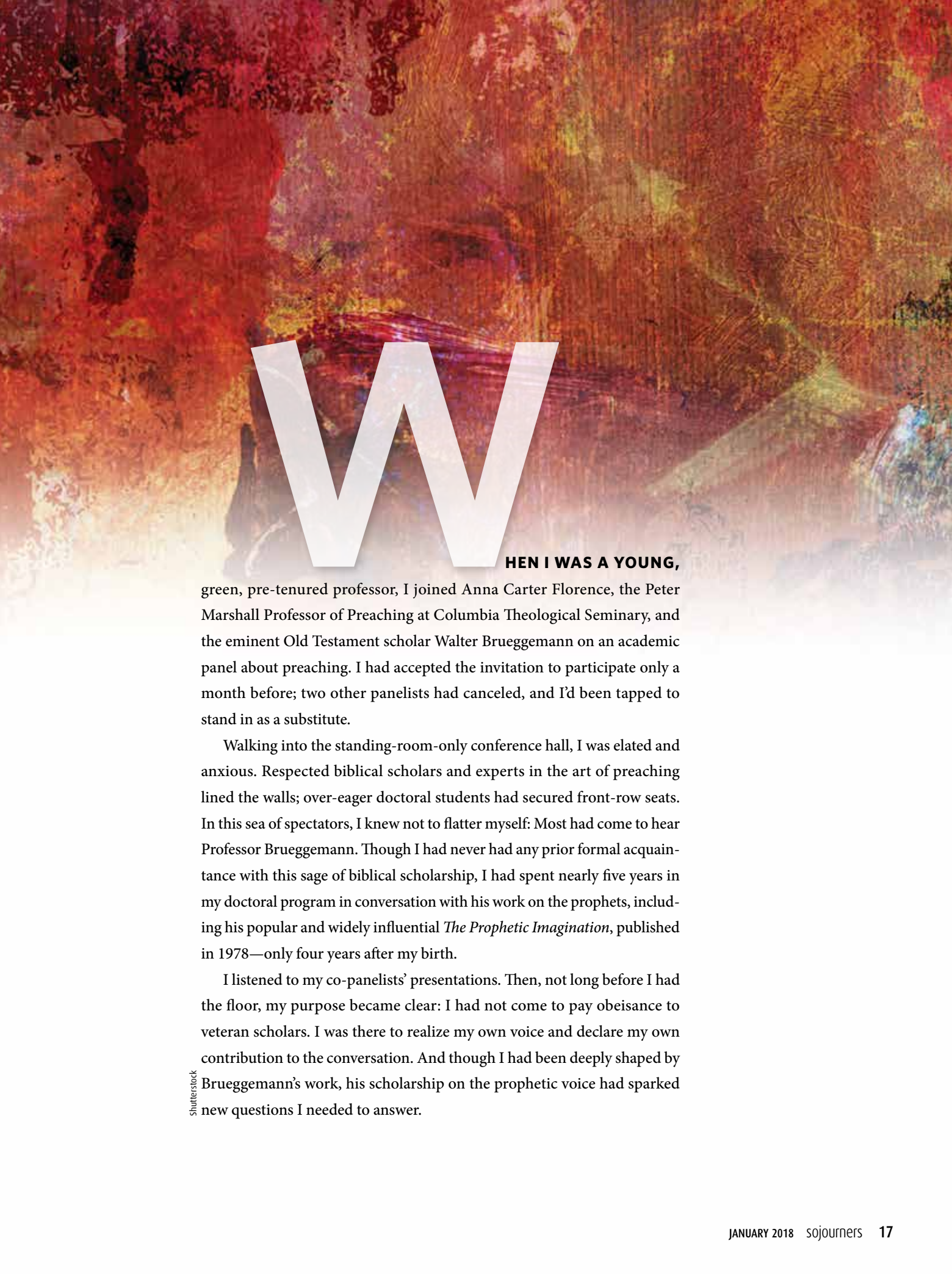
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relentless hope

In a culture of despair,
Walter Brueggemann's
The Prophetic Imagination
(still) reminds us that
prophets must do more
than speak truth to power.

by **KENYATTA R. GILBERT**

A large, white, stylized letter 'W' is centered in the upper half of the page. It is set against a background of an abstract painting with warm, textured colors like red, orange, and yellow. The painting has a visible brushstroke texture.

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG,

green, pre-tenured professor, I joined Anna Carter Florence, the Peter Marshall Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, and the eminent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann on an academic panel about preaching. I had accepted the invitation to participate only a month before; two other panelists had canceled, and I'd been tapped to stand in as a substitute.

Walking into the standing-room-only conference hall, I was elated and anxious. Respected biblical scholars and experts in the art of preaching lined the walls; over-eager doctoral students had secured front-row seats. In this sea of spectators, I knew not to flatter myself: Most had come to hear Professor Brueggemann. Though I had never had any prior formal acquaintance with this sage of biblical scholarship, I had spent nearly five years in my doctoral program in conversation with his work on the prophets, including his popular and widely influential *The Prophetic Imagination*, published in 1978—only four years after my birth.

I listened to my co-panelists' presentations. Then, not long before I had the floor, my purpose became clear: I had not come to pay obeisance to veteran scholars. I was there to realize my own voice and declare my own contribution to the conversation. And though I had been deeply shaped by Brueggemann's work, his scholarship on the prophetic voice had sparked new questions I needed to answer.

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Prophets conjure up possibilities of another reality when the king declares that only one reality exists.

"Brueggemann's critique of royal consciousness and structures opened the door for us to engage in post-colonial critique of the Bible and imperialist ideology in religion. Rarely would you find a classic that speaks so poignantly to today's political situation as it was published 40 years ago. Now more than ever, we cannot succumb to despair, but learn from the hopefulness in the book."

—Kwok Pui-lan, author,
Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology

New perceptions of reality

Acts of utterance are acts of imagination that evoke new perceptions of reality. Through spoken word, prophets rise up to engage life-and-death matters, carrying the divine response into material reality. This idea is the central thread through all of Brueggemann's work on prophetic speech.

The Prophetic Imagination, first presented as lectures for United Church of Christ and Disciples of

Christ ministers in Washington state, remains "one of the most perceptive uncoverings of the prophetic voice in contemporary Old Testament study," as Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller put it. Brueggemann himself described the book as "my first publication in which I more-or-less found my own voice as a teacher in the church." This admission is worth remembering because, regrettably, not all biblical theologians see their scholarship as work in service to ecclesial communities.

The focus of his time-honored classic is the prophetic consciousness of Moses, a holy tradition that continues in the work of other biblical prophets and consummates in Jesus of Nazareth. According to Brueggemann, this prophetic consciousness is concerned with the rejection of the status quo, speaking words of resistance, a healthy suspicion of power, and self-awareness about the seductive influences of culture.

In the Bible, this consciousness echoes through the despair-penetrating hope that Jeremiah and Isaiah offered to exile-weary Israelites. Today, this consciousness reverberates through people such as William Barber II who speak out against white nationalism, police violence, and corporate greed to remind us another way is possible.

The ideological opposite of the prophetic

tradition is imperialism, or "royal consciousness," which Brueggemann finds in the Egyptian empire and the reign of Solomon. While prophetic consciousness promotes an economics of equality, politics of justice, and religion of God's freedom, royal consciousness, by contrast, reinforces an economics of affluence, politics of oppression, and religion of divine accessibility where God is fully controllable and perceived as the king's patron. We hear echoes of this imperial mindset today when religious leaders—professional God-knowers—claim that natural disasters are a sign of God's displeasure and at the same time endorse political candidates whose moral actions and legislative agendas stand counter to Jesus' vision of good news for the poor.

As Brueggemann explains, prophetic consciousness always seeks to free people from the royal consciousness. People locked in an imperial mindset assimilate to the status quo—critics are silenced, grief is buried, faith identity is lost, and passion withers. And when passion disappears, people develop immunity to transcendent voices and to concern for one's neighbor.

But through acts of creative speech, prophetic imagination creates a genuine alternative. Prophetic imagination—"alternative consciousness"—counters royal consciousness with pathos and imagination. By waging poetic war through image and metaphor, prophets conjure up possibilities of another reality when the king declares that only one reality exists.

Seminary, sanctuary, streets

In the four decades since its publication, *The Prophetic Imagination* has been translated into six languages. It has been cited by South African Christians who challenged apartheid, psychologists analyzing the role of grief in hope, and Catholic theologians responding to the HIV/



AIDS pandemic. And across the denominational spectrum, hundreds of scholars and theologians have turned to *The Prophetic Imagination* to provide insight on pastoral care, religious education, preaching, and biblical interpretation.

According to activist theologian and biblical scholar Ched Myers, in the U.S. the book sparked a movement of alternative consciousness at a time when the prophetic voice “had been dulled or disappeared in the preaching and teaching of most dominant-culture churches.” As Myers explained, “*The Prophetic Imagination* gave countless mainstream white Christians permission to reconsider social justice as an integral part of their faith and practice. In it a respected member of the academic guild (and a Presbyterian) dared to breach the gulf between seminary, sanctuary, and streets—something all too rare in white professional biblical studies at the time.”

Duke Divinity professor Ellen F. Davis put *The Prophetic Imagination* in a broader context. “This one book,” Davis said, “evidences what is of perennial value in Walter’s wide work: namely his deep conviction that these texts speak directly to the church in our time, and the scholar’s task is to do the kind of exegetical and rhetorical work that makes their voices audible, intelligible, and compelling to people who are eager to hear that kind of honest speech about what God is about in our world.”

Brueggemann’s work on the characteristics of prophetic speech created an opening for me to explore the continuity between biblical prophecy and the prophetic speech of African-American preachers in the U.S., a topic that eventually led me to write *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching From the Great Migration to Civil Rights*. For nearly a decade I have been chasing down answers to questions inspired by Brueggemann’s work: What does it mean to

preach prophetically? Why are culture and context essential to how imaginative speech functions? And how do we preach prophetically in a postmodern context?

Voices from life’s underside

When I was a young doctoral student reading *The Prophetic Imagination* for the first time, I was surprised Brueggemann’s work wasn’t in conversation with African-American theologians such as Jacquelyn Grant, Randall C. Bailey, Katie G. Cannon, and James Cone. To me, these voices were crucial in bringing the oppressive structures of systemic injustice to the attention of the mainline—real-live examples of prophetic consciousness in our own era.

Their absence was especially curious because *The Prophetic Imagination* emphasizes the importance of “subcommunities,” or habitats that stand in tension with the dominant community in any political economy. These places, as Brueggemann describes, become dynamic spaces to actively nurture “a community of peculiar discourse with practices of memory, hope, and pain that keep healthy human life available.” Or in other words: If you want to see alternative consciousness in action, you must look beyond the majority culture.

But while he recognizes the importance of subcommunities in his writing, Brueggemann did not specifically tie his scholarship on prophetic ministry to a specific people or era. Thus, at the time of his writing, his more universal claims about the prophetic tradition remained untested beyond his principal audience, which appeared mostly to be people like himself: white, “mainline” church folks.

For example, in the book’s postscript on

“Languishing in a forlorn inner-city parish, in despair at the lack of movement, God gave me Walt’s book. I read it cover to cover at one sitting. When I finished, I was born again. Walt showed me that what my church needed was not my carping criticism, but God’s gift of prophetic imagination. This book gave me the guts to work with God in raising the dead through nothing but words. Compromised, too-eager-to-please me got to be Jeremiah.”

—Will Willimon, professor
of the practice of Christian
ministry, Duke Divinity School



If you want to see alternative consciousness in action, you must look beyond the majority culture.

"The Prophetic Imagination was an intellectual catalyst for designing our community initiative to connect eco-justice, mass incarceration, and a just economy with black liberation theology. We shared a vision of divine/prophetic imagination with our village to 'equip the saints' with an alternative vocabulary and revolutionary imagination of what a community is and can become in a city possessed by a royal consciousness."

—Otis Moss III, senior pastor,
Trinity United Church of Christ,
Chicago

practice, Brueggemann writes that prophetic imagination ultimately must be more than "a good idea." "It is a concrete practice that is undertaken by real believers who share the conviction of grief and hope that escapes the restraints of dominant culture," he writes. To that end, he cites examples of alternative consciousness in action: communities that care for people with dementia, provide health-care for the poor, and incorporate lament and dissent into their corporate liturgy.

Brueggemann acknowledges that this list is "happenstance and subjective," limited by the churches and organizations he knows. Yet his contemporary examples largely overlook how religion, scripture, and culture have been central to naming and interpreting existential events of ultimate significance in the African-American lived experience in North America.

Of course, as a white, Presbyterian male writing in the 1970s, Brueggemann was not in a position to speak authoritatively on these topics. In the book's revised edition, Brueggemann notes that his own affinity with liberation theology grew after *The Prophetic Imagination* was published. In the years since, Brueggemann's more-forthright chastisement of the white establishment has given me hope that there are voices from the majority community that are not bought.

Nevertheless, we are right to consider how Brueggemann's own social location influenced his understanding of a prophetic voice

that speaks for the margins. As an African-American, middle-class man thinking about the history of prophetic preaching, I must be careful of similar concerns myself.

To see the connection between social justice as an aspect of the human condition, contextual theology, and identity construction, one does well to go through Brueggemann. But to understand the power of the prophetic word to impact social change in the here-and-now, to illuminate what might otherwise be considered one-size-fits-all claims, one must draw in other voices who take seriously the distinct question sets of persons and communities experiencing life's underside.

From pulpits to hip-hop

The prophetic word is a word of relentless hope. In a society that cooperates with violence and where a large contingent of white evangelicals tolerates divisive and bigoted rhetoric from the leader of the free world, *The Prophetic Imagination* and its sequel, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*, have secured their place as hope-generating lexicons for courageous Christian preachers today.

If we take these books seriously, we will recognize that the contemporary church must ask itself again and again: How are we to navigate our current social climate in the way of Jesus, the disinherited Palestinian Jew whose love ethic stands opposite America's enthronement of whiteness, unregulated embrace of capitalism, and obsession with conquering—the triple evils that have profoundly corrupted U.S. Christianity's reputation around the globe?

Where do we find prophetic consciousness today? As a preacher, my first instinct is to look to the pulpit. After all, who will speak

Continued on Page 22

"The Prophetic Imagination not only helped teach me about the ancient vocation of prophet, but helped me see the importance of the prophetic vocation today. It challenged me to resist the numbness of empire, enter into the deep pain of our world, and speak and act in ways that cultivate life."

—Mark Van Steenwyk,
executive director,
Center for Prophetic
Imagination



JP Keenan

How God Intervenes

Kenyatta Gilbert talks with Walter Brueggemann about the prophetic call in 2018.

KENYATTA GILBERT: What does “being prophetic” mean to you today?

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN: I think it means to identify with some clarity and boldness the kinds of political and economic practices that contradict the purposes of God. And if they contradict the purposes of God, they will come to no good end. If you think about economic injustice or ecological abuse of the environment, it is the path of disaster. In the Old Testament they traced the path of disaster, and it seems to me that our work now is to trace the path of disaster in which we are engaged.

The amazing thing about the prophets is that they were able to pivot, after they had done that, to talk with confidence that God is working out an alternative world of well-being, of justice, of peace, of security—in spite of the contradictions.

How do we establish a sense of clarity about who we think God is in this world of radical pluralism? As long as we try to talk in terms of labels or creeds or mantras, we will never get on the same page. But if we talk about human possibility and human hurt and human suffering, then it doesn't matter whether we're talking with Muslims or Christians or liberals or conservatives; the irreducible reality of human hurt is undeniable.

It's universal. Then we have to talk about the causes of human hurt and the remedies of human hurt. And then we get to politics and economics. I don't think that's easy given political pluralism, but the prophetic word on that basis can be fairly unambiguous. It's no mystery about the kinds of economic practices that are causing human hurt. Under President Trump, they basically have to do with deregulation, which means unleashing greedy power.

If God is a God who intervenes on the human plane, what do we believe about God reversing or addressing those practices? I believe God energizes and empowers human agency. And human agents, when they are empowered, can change [these practices]. What happens is that well-off people, like me, don't want to exercise human agency; we like it the way it is. And if you are terribly disadvantaged, you can be in such despair that you don't undertake any human agency. The point of preaching is to say that God's hopes are to be performed through human agency. The promise of the gospel is that the powers and principalities will yield to human agency that is authorized and powered by God; it's the capacity to transfer divine authority into human agency—which of course is what Dr. King did when he mobilized people to engage in civic actions. ■

“The point of preaching is to say that God's hopes are to be performed through human agency.”

Watch the full conversation at sojo.net/prophetic.



Hip-hop artists use imaginative language to let people know that hope is available, despite damning evidence to the contrary.

"The Prophetic Imagination is a book that both wounded and healed me at the same time. I lamented how much of my own theology had been shaped by dominant/empire themes, and I became hungry for good news that was prophetic and hopeful—and from the margins of society."

—D.L. Mayfield, author,
Assimilate or Go Home

Continued from Page 20
legitimately on behalf of our society's weak and most vulnerable citizens if not leaders within Christ's church? And I'm hopeful; I've been privileged to journey alongside African-American clergy who are using spoken word to creatively challenge a death-dealing culture.

But prophetic imagination cannot be so narrowly confined. The places where we can see this alternative consciousness let loose in the world include not only congregational pulpits but also music studios. When I listen to "Welcome to America," by Christian rap artist Lecrae, or watch the music video of Common and John Legend's Oscar-winning "Glory," I hear songs that marry prophetic criticism and hope to honor sacred truths.

Like African-American spirituals, "Glory" is a proclamation of hope in the face of human tragedy. With impeccable timing and lyrical precision, Common describes a kind of justice he wants to see in the world—justice that honors cultural particularity. One can hear this impulse in Common's trouble-making word-play, "Justice for all just ain't specific enough," which both recalls the Pledge of Allegiance and the unfulfilled promise of true democracy for African Americans. He infers that to cling to the garbs of religious piety without concrete, just actions to follow is to nurture a false testimony that mocks the meaning of Christ's public crucifixion, negates Rosa Parks' courage to sit in a forbidden seat, and trivializes the death of Michael Brown, the unarmed teen fatally shot in Ferguson, Mo., by a white police officer who escaped indictment.

One would neither expect—nor perhaps desire to see—Walter Brueggemann outfitted with a hoodie and earbuds, head bobbing to a poetic construal of the gospel in hip-hop verse.

Yet, more than any other biblical theologian, Brueggemann's work has helped me to name Christian hip-hop as a hopeful and dynamic habitat for what he describes in *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* as "imagining the world as though YHWH ... is a real character and the defining agent in the world." Like the subcommunities that Brueggemann describes, hip-hop artists use imaginative language to let people know that hope is available, despite damning evidence to the contrary.

I am not implying that we should accommodate to culture uncritically and run the risk of having the peculiar news of God's freedom in Christ ensnared by the spiritual relativism of secular society. I am suggesting, however, that preachers—and all of us—would stand to grow in prophetic imagination if we listen hospitably to rich rhetorical discourse often considered unsuitable for the sanctuary. Tepid talks might satisfy the catechized believer, but if we fail to poetically reclaim assertive, more-courageous *justice-to-hope* themes, an opportunity to reach a generation of would-be Christian converts in communities on the brink of collapse will have been forfeited.

Speaking truth to power while adhering to realistic hope remains the only viable way to community flourishing in a culture of fear. This is the work for which we've been commissioned: to name God and voice God's enduring concern about human suffering and despair and not to overlook what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ, who personified prophetic fulfillment. ■

Kenyatta R. Gilbert is associate professor of homiletics at the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C., and founding director of the Preaching Project. His book Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons About Justice and Hope is forthcoming from Abingdon Press.

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are building more compassionate—and more
effective—models for children who break the law.**

by **MATT SMITH** • *photos by* **RICHARD ROSS**

EVERY DAY FOR A YEAR, Marcus awoke in a locked room in a Wisconsin youth prison.

"You wake up every day hoping it's a dream, and it's not," said Marcus, who at 17 was sent to the Lincoln Hills boy's detention center for sexual misconduct. "Four walls, a desk, and a cot."

He said guards in that lockup often told boys, "You'll be back." But Marcus—who spoke on condition that he not be identified by his full name—not only swears that's not going to happen to him, he's working to keep others from having the same experience.

Despite years of reform efforts, thousands of teens still wake up in large, secure, prison-like facilities such as Lincoln Hills, many of them for nonviolent offenses. Marcus is one of a growing number of voices arguing that such places should be shut down for good.

"It's clear that youth prisons are not places of redemption and hope," said Liane Rozzell, a senior policy associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation has led a nationwide push to shutter juvenile incarceration facilities, which have failed to reduce youth crime, and replace them with effective alternatives that keep kids in their communities, are less expensive, and drive down the juvenile crime rate.

"There's a clear lane for faith-based organizations and people to grasp that real care for young people means we will not be putting them in situations that traumatize them, cut off their opportunities, and lead them to essentially be thrown away," Rozzell said. These institutions fail the duty to provide for the "basic human dignity" of youth, she added, violating the principles not only of Christianity but of many other faiths.

The movement has drawn in onetime prisoners such as Marcus and parents of kids in the system, which is how Rozzell got involved. But it's also bringing in courtroom players, lawmakers, and ordinary people from a wide swath of religious traditions.

**Despite years of
reform efforts,
thousands of
teens still wake
up in prison-like
facilities.**

**A girl sits in
solitary
confinement at
a correctional
facility in Oregon.**

“What’s kind of great about this is that no matter where you fall on the spectrum—traditionalist conservative religious faith, or more of what folks might call progressive or liberal faith organizations, or anything in between—folks are pretty clear that using this kind of approach is not only not good for young people, but not good for their communities,” Rozzell said.

Doing nothing is not an option

Since the 1970s, juvenile-justice reformers have been arguing against the idea of large, secure lockups for young offenders. But they were swimming against the tide of a surge in crime that didn’t abate for two decades—tough-on-crime policies spawned by that era have lingered on much longer.

And there’s a wide racial disparity among those who get locked up. “The rates of black youth [incarceration] are five times greater than white youth; and Latino youth are at two to three times,” said Marcia Rincon-Gallardo, founder of Noxtin, a California-based juvenile-justice think tank with a special focus on Latino and Indigenous communities. While racial and ethnic disparities have been reduced in the last quarter-century, structural racism still exists that “allows for predominantly youth of color to still sit in detention.”

By the late 1990s, more than 77,000 teens were held in large lockups across the United States, and more than 12,000 teens were in adult facilities. “Lock-em-up” policies fueled a chicken-and-egg paradox for authorities that further swelled the rolls, said Steven Teske, the chief juvenile-court judge in Clayton County, Ga., in suburban Atlanta. “Most judges are not just throwing kids in prisons because they want to,” said Teske, who sits on a state justice-reform council. “We’ve spent so much of our state money in brick and mortar and building prisons, there’s very little for treatment in the community. So judges are forced to put them in prisons, because there’s no place else for them.”

Advocates such as the Casey Foundation argue that youth prisons have proven impervious to reform, despite years of efforts. But gradually, state-by-state, reformers have racked up a series of wins—sometimes with the support of conservative politicians who can’t stomach pouring more taxpayer money into detention centers that cost



approximately \$100,000 per kid.

The shift to move beyond youth incarceration is happening in places such as Kansas, where one of the state’s two youth prisons closed its doors in March 2017. Notoriously cash-strapped Kansas not only passed an extensive package of reforms in 2016, but agreed to plow all resulting savings into community-based alternatives, said Benet Magnuson, executive director of Kansas Appleseed. The win was the result of “a slow and building process” that started at the local level, trying to convince communities there was a better way, Magnuson said. “I would throw out the question to a group: ‘If your kid got in trouble with the law, and the state gave you \$100,000 a year to get the kid back on the right path, how many of you would spend that to put your kid in a cell? How many of you would spend that on therapy or education or all this other stuff?’ It was a wonderful brainstorming moment.”

That built to the state level with help from The Pew Charitable Trusts, which collected data and brought lawmakers in for meetings. In one of those meetings, Magnuson said, State Sen. Greg Smith—the Republican chair of the Senate committee that oversees juvenile justice—declared that doing nothing “was not an option.” “I think it really set up the reform effort for success,” Magnuson said. “It was like Doubting Thomas—at some point, the evidence is there, and it’s not a matter of needing more study or more interviews; it’s a matter of having the will to act to make lives better for people.”

The first-year results of the Kansas reforms have been better than expected. Not only has the 128-bed Larned Juvenile

Correctional Facility northwest of Wichita closed, but judges are placing fewer teens in custody overall, Magnuson said. And the savings, which had been expected to run about \$8 million in the first several months, instead topped \$12 million, he said.

A youth-centered approach

Other new efforts are underway in places such as Milwaukee, where Marcus is helping out by speaking to community organizations about his time in Lincoln Hills. Sharlen Moore, co-founder of Youth Justice Milwaukee, said Lincoln Hills and its sister facility for girls, Copper Lake, are known for “atrocious” treatment and high recidivism rates. As many as three-quarters of those teens end up back at the facilities, she said. “It’s a breeding ground for mistreatment, abuse, and, quite frankly, young people not learning from their mistakes,” Moore said. “They’re getting set up to be pushed into the adult system.”

Wisconsin’s juvenile lockup centers are about 225 miles north of Milwaukee, the state’s largest city. That makes it difficult for many families to visit. And lawsuits recently revealed cases of teens pepper-sprayed by guards and locked in solitary confinement for long stretches. When the videos documenting the use of pepper spray came to light as the result of lawsuits, a state corrections spokesperson told reporters the facilities have made “significant changes” to improve conditions.

Marcus believes Lincoln Hills should be closed, “simply because it is not run the correct way. I had personal experiences that were good, but I witnessed things that were not good,” he said. He had a counselor



he credits with changing his life, and made friends he's kept in touch with since getting out. But some staffers treated their charges "like garbage." Sometimes that involved physical abuse; other times, kids on their way out were taunted, "Everybody comes back."

"Maybe Lincoln Hills itself doesn't need to be shut down, but I just think the idea behind Lincoln Hills needs to be shut down," Marcus said. "I understand, sometimes it gets testy [and] you have kids who act out. You have kids who are going to do dumb stuff and fight. But they're just kids."

While some young offenders may still need to be placed in secure facilities for serious crimes, Moore said, what's needed is "something totally different." She said, "How we envision a secure facility is smaller, with no more than a dozen young people. It's therapeutic, and it's providing young people with all the resources they need in order to learn from their mistake and become the productive and amazing young people they were born to be."

Activists also notched a recent win in Virginia, where the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center closed in June. Rozzell's son once served time in Beaumont, an experience that drew her into efforts through her own church to close similar facilities. "It was clear to see this was not something that was helpful or good in any way," she said. "I used to say how broken the system was. But I understood that it was designed to do what it is doing, and we need to change how it's doing what it's doing."

Rozzell called Beaumont "basically a Supermax for kids." It closed after a combination of reforms by Virginia state

"Restorative justice can be used by people from all kinds of faith traditions and no faith tradition."

leaders—including a new juvenile-justice director who came from a background of child advocacy—and pressure by advocates to make sure the money saved went to community-based programs. "There were a number of folks who were faith-based who were part of that effort," she said.

What replaces the youth prison?

For various reasons, juvenile arrest rates across the nation fell 39 percent from 2000 to 2012, according to the Sentencing Project, and new models are emerging for dealing with youth offenders. In the past two decades, a new approach—often dubbed the "Missouri model" after the state that pioneered it—has become a preferred direction for many advocates. It limits out-of-home placements for young offenders, maintains safety through "eyes-on" supervision instead of isolation or technology, keeps those who are committed to facilities closer to home, and emphasizes therapy and education over correction and punishment.

In the Missouri model, states supervise and treat the small group of youth whose criminal behavior poses a significant threat to public safety, and treat other offenders differently, instead of an expensive, ineffective, one-size-fits-all approach. Most teen offenders need an arrangement more like special education programs in schools, Teske said. "These are kids who have some extremely special needs, but their needs are the type that can cause harm to other people when they're on the street," he said. "When we put them in large populations, they're not going to get the attention they need and deserve."

In Georgia, a 2013 overhaul of the juvenile justice system resulted in 20 percent fewer teens being committed to the state Department of Juvenile Justice—and an estimated saving of \$85 million. Judges can no longer commit a young offender for a misdemeanor, Teske said, unless it's a third offense and one of the priors is a felony. As a result, the agency has closed one of its youth prisons and won't build two other planned facilities. And in Teske's county, the number of kids placed in secure facilities is down 43 percent. "The sky didn't fall. In fact, crime has gone down," he said. "Our juvenile crime is down 71 percent—46 percent of it is felonies that are down, which is really a true measure of juvenile crime."

There's also an increasing focus on what's called "restorative justice." It's drawn from civil traditions and the New Testament's Golden Rule, and emphasizes personal responsibility, making amends, and repairing community. There's a better chance of that happening if the offender isn't shipped away somewhere. "There is a really diverse group of people who are all pursuing restorative justice from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds," Rozzell said. "This is an approach that is available to and can be used by people from all kinds of faith traditions and no faith tradition."

Those campaigns have led to a wealth of knowledge for communities looking for change:

■ **First, every effort needs data**, said Judge Teske. "The first step is: What does your population look like? Who's low-risk, who's medium-risk, who's high-risk sitting your prisons right now? Once you've identified those, what are the type of criminogenic things that got them in there? You can use that to identify what would be the best evidence-based programs and practices you should target ..."

■ **Use the personal touch.** Voices of people with their own experiences of the system—like those of Rozzell and Marcus—often carry more weight than those of experts. "They'll be the ones with the urgency and the political will to really hold systems accountable to close systems down," Rincon-Gallardo said.

■ **Several organizations have put together guidebooks** for would-be reformers, including Youth First, the National Juvenile Justice Network, and the FrameWorks Institute.

■ **Finally, be inclusive.** In Milwaukee, Moore said, that means including not just minority communities that are disproportionately affected by crime and incarceration, but white people as well—and victims as well as offenders.

"We have to do a lot of community building with everyone," she said, "to talk with them about the issues that are impacting this city and what we need to do differently to overcome them." ■

Matt Smith is an Atlanta-based writer, editor, and contributor to Youth Today and Juvenile Justice Information Exchange.

The Person Who Remains

Amid all that dementia takes away, how do we nurture the spirituality that endures?

by JANICE HICKS

MY MOTHER LIVED WITH dementia for more than 20 years. My family members all experienced grief that was deep and complex, yet there were surprising moments with Mom that I found profoundly spiritual. As I spent time with her through the stages of her Alzheimer's, I experienced a few times when she reached a place more complex and lucid than our understanding of her medical condition might allow.

As a scientist with an interest in chaplaincy, I wondered: What is known about this intersection of dementia and spirituality? What does the church say about dementia? How might all this inform our ministry to those experiencing dementia?

"Dementia" itself is a difficult word. Its origin comes from "de-" (undoing) "mentia" (mind). Already this label stigmatizes a person. A preferred term might be ADRD: Alzheimer's Disease and Related Diseases. Alzheimer's is a brain disease thought to cause some 60 to 80 percent of dementia cases. Related diseases include vascular, frontotemporal, and Lewy Bodies types of dementia. All have symptoms of memory loss, cognitive loss, and eventually physical loss (such as the inability to walk), caused by progressive damage and death of brain cells.

No one knows the root causes. Our language will become more accurate once medical science gets a better understanding of these diseases. In the meantime, dementia is the term that most people know. It does not mean the person is crazy (demented). Despite the progressive deterioration of the brain, there is much that remains at each stage.

In *The Moral Challenge of Alzheimer's Disease*, bioethicist Stephen Post suggested that the stigma concerning dementia results from our society's overvaluation of rationality. Our modern attitude, stressing rationality over other human attributes gifted by God, has roots in early Christian theologians and secular philosophers from ancient Greece through the Enlightenment, as well as our culture of contemporary science. In Plato's description of three parts of the soul, reason is the charioteer controlling two winged horses representing good and evil impulses.

Thinkstock

When a person develops dementia,



are they less of a person? Do they lose their connection to God?

Early Christian theologians generally attributed the image of God (*imago dei*) in humans to the mind/spirit or soul, which was ranked higher than the body. Basil said that “the rational part is the human being.” Augustine believed the mind has two parts: “The higher part contemplates eternal truths and makes judgments” and God communicates with us through it. French philosopher René Descartes further emphasized the supremacy of rationality with his dictum “I think, therefore I am.” Many of us today still fall into the Cartesian idea that the rational part, thinking, defines “who I am.”

Rationality is important, but rationality as a determinant of the status of personhood is greatly problematic. When a person develops dementia, are they less of a person? Do they lose their connection to God? Conscious or not, such beliefs can create harmful scenarios for people with dementia. Seeing a person as “less than” promotes an attitude of stigma that raises the general populace’s fear of these labels and categories.

Contemporary theologians have developed a more balanced view of what makes us human. In *Eccentric Existence*, theologian David Kelsey proposes that the basis for the value and relationship of the human being lies in God, that is, outside the human beings themselves. Kelsey says that personhood is “a status before God” dependent on God’s relating to who I am (a vertical orientation) and others’ relating to who I am (a horizontal orientation). “Personhood is not even a function of how we relate to God,” Kelsey writes. Our “personhood is entirely a function of how God relates to us in creating us ... and hardly at all from anything else.”

God’s relating to us is surely not lost in dementia or any illness.

According to Kelsey, other qualities beyond rationality make us human, including emotion, love, spirituality, awareness, and courage. These traits have been observed in people with dementia. Philosopher-theologian Nancey Murphy points out that when a person is viewed as an individual, which our culture



The author and her mother in 2011.

tends to do, their value becomes reduced with an illness, but if they are viewed as part of the house-

hold, as in the original Hebrew tradition, they maintain their standing in the “psychical whole.” Looking back, I realize that despite my mother’s illness, she was the center of the family until the day she died.

Indeed, we value infants, and infants are not rational. We are all dependent at times. We are all limited. Most of us can’t memorize 100 numbers or recall everything that has happened to us in the past. Our ability to remember peaks at age 25; every decade after that, we lose 5 percent of the cells in our memory center, the hippocampus. Perhaps those with dementia remind us of our limitations and that makes us uncomfortable. By the standard to which we hold people with dementia, we are all “de-menting” to some extent.

The mind and the spirit

With aging also comes the opportunity to develop other ways of knowing and being, particularly concerning our spirituality. What effect does dementia have on spirituality?

Dementia can land a person squarely in the present. Memory may be gone or unreachable, and planning for the future may also not be possible. The hired caregiver who saw my mom every day once told me, “I should pay you to see your mom! I feel so good when I leave; she is so in the moment.” Zen-like, Mom would notice whatever was in her sight and appreciate its beauty—clouds, a coffee cup, even a plastic flower. It made me feel good, too, to spend time with her.

Studies show that when a person’s executive functions, such as planning and problem-solving, are repressed due to damage to the brain, their spiritual functions can be enhanced. Vietnam War veterans with bullet wounds to the front, executive part of the brain reported more spiritual experiences than those with bullet wounds elsewhere in the brain. Think about the practice of Buddhist meditation: As the monks meditate, they are inhibiting their

Safe and Welcoming

CHURCHES IN Great Britain, and increasingly in the U.S., have developed ways to become “dementia friendly.” Here are a few suggestions. Visit spiritualityanddementia.org for more information and resources.

- **EDUCATE** church staff and laity to have at least a basic understanding of dementia and how it affects a person physically, emotionally, and intellectually.
- **ENSURE** that the worship space is safe and welcoming to the elderly and cognitively impaired.
- **PROVIDE** a volunteer companion for the person with dementia to allow the caregiver to relax a bit and worship.
- **HOST** a monthly Memory Café, a stigma-free social gathering for people with dementia and their care partners, to extend the community of faith to families, caregivers, and neighbors.
- **ORGANIZE** a short monthly worship service for people with dementia; include familiar hymns and scriptures.
- **OFFER** a blessing ceremony when a person with dementia moves into a care facility.
- **JOIN** efforts to eliminate disparities in health care. Dementia affects African Americans, Indigenous people, and Latinos at a higher rate than it does Caucasians, and women more than men, but access to services is often less than equitable. —JH

executive functions, telling themselves to clear the mind and allow “being” not “doing.” This practice allows the spiritual—for example, a feeling of oneness—to arise.

The same might be true if the executive function area is damaged from ADRD. At a time in the progression of Alzheimer’s when my mother was no longer articulating sentences, she once said (with perfect fluidity), “I know he knows me.” I could only make sense of this if the “he” referred to God. Despite what we would characterize as her condition of chaotic confusion, to be so certain and lucid that God knew her is an astounding pronouncement. I was in awe at the quality of her aliveness and wondered what experience had moved Mom to say this.

Through brain imaging, researchers have found that no one area in the brain is responsible for the “self.” Different areas are responsible for our autobiography, for recognizing our face in a mirror, for what we think about ourself, for our talents, our demeanor, our morality, and so on. Dementia cannot fully remove this self. As my mother once said with difficulty, but very clearly, “I’m still the same.” That was important for me to understand, and it helped me to respect her personhood, no matter how the dementia had progressed. She perhaps understood more than I had given her credit for. We cannot know all the subtleties the person with dementia is experiencing.

Spiritual activity also is manifest throughout the brain. Attempts to find a “spiritual center” or “God spot” in the brain have failed. Correlations of brain scans with spiritual experiences depend very much on the nature of the experience. During meditation, areas of the brain involving focus and emotion light up. Feelings of oneness or unity with God or the world light up a different area of the brain. So damage due to dementia cannot fully remove spirituality (and could in theory enhance it).

What about the reverse? How does spirituality affect dementia? Tapping into spirituality might help people cope with their condition. Many studies in medical and hospice literature show that spirituality improves patient outcomes. The fruits of the spirit—faith, hope, and love—are simply good for humans on many levels, including the physical and mental. Further, awakening old memories can actively help the brain. Reminiscence therapy—the discussion of past activities and events often using old photographs or objects—is based on this.

Memories of music from our youth can survive Alzheimer’s well into the late stages. Studies show that the location in the brain identified with this early music seems to be skirted by the damage of Alzheimer’s. So, as shown in several famous videos, music can sometimes “awaken” a person. Even in late-stage Alzheimer’s, Mom and I used to “dance” with our hands to a favorite song of hers, “Pennsylvania Polka.” When I let my hands relax, she would keep the dance going, moving our hands in perfect time to the music.

For those raised in church, hymns will often remain

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My Year with Alzheimer’s

I was emotionally and spiritually more open; I experienced God’s grace.

by **DAVID HILFIKER**

SIX YEARS AGO I began gradually losing cognitive function: getting lost in familiar areas, losing mental arithmetic skills, getting confused, and losing memory. A year later a neurologist diagnosed me with “probable” Alzheimer’s disease.

As a physician, I knew what “probable” meant: He thought I had it but wouldn’t make a formal diagnosis until it got worse. I believed I had Alzheimer’s disease. One year later, however, my cognitive dysfunction, while still real even today, had improved slightly and, more important, had not been progressive. A new medical test demonstrated conclusively that, whatever it was, I didn’t have Alzheimer’s. So ... for one year I had “Alzheimer’s”; then I didn’t.

I hesitate to write this for fear of downplaying the very real suffering of Alzheimer’s disease. For caregivers, it can be especially devastating. But my year of believing I had Alzheimer’s was among the best of my life. I became less aloof; my friends said I was more pleasant; I was emotionally and spiritually more open; I experienced God’s grace.

I chose not to keep my diagnosis to myself. I went slowly but informed an ever-widening circle. After I announced it to our small congregation, they overwhelmed me with their love and support. It had always been there, I’m sure,

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but now I experienced it.

To chronicle my losses, I began a blog, "Watching the Lights Go Out." A small community developed around the blog, mostly caregivers but others with cognitive loss, too, some much more advanced than mine. I discovered a stunning hopefulness. A minority of people with Alzheimer's certainly become paranoid, hostile, and generally unpleasant. But the majority, it seems, are like Janice Hicks' mom: more receptive, perhaps, and living "squarely in the present."

What can I say to you? For you with early disease, don't hide it. Others will notice, anyway, and the embarrassed silence will be painful for you both. If you both know, you can talk about it,

It's your caregivers who will suffer most; give them a chance to grieve.

maybe even joke about it. You're still you! Fear of their own cognitive future may drive some close friends away, but with others the relationship will evolve, perhaps deepen. And you can give up the embarrassment.

Recognize that it's your caregivers who will suffer most; give them a chance to grieve. We talked with our adult children about inheritance. Discuss your end-of-life care. Write down and sign, even notarize, what you decide.

For caregivers, drop the heroic stoicism. This will be the hardest thing you've ever done. As care needs increase, get friends to help, perhaps give you a vacation. But as with Hicks and her mom, while some treasured parts of your relationship are lost, others will appear.

I remember a documentary from years ago chronicling a woman and her mother; they were joyfully dancing with each other. "My mother and I used to hate one another," she said. "Now we're best of friends." There is much suffering with Alzheimer's, but out of suffering and sadness, joy can sometimes emerge. ■

David Hilfiker, author of Not All of Us Are Saints, is a retired physician and founder of Joseph's House, a community for homeless men with AIDS in Washington, D.C.

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important touchstones. Familiar hymns, scriptures, and prayers from a person's very early age can stimulate the brain and enable it to function better for a while.

Perhaps more important, there may be opportunities for a person to continue to grow in their closeness to God. As in any ministry, we are there to "re-mind" the person of God's presence and love.

Sustaining love and practical presence

There are more than 5 million people in the U.S. with Alzheimer's. Most are living at home—you probably see some of them every day, more than likely escorted by a family member or hired caregiver. If there is no cure, the number is expected to triple by the year 2050 with the growing number of aging baby boomers. Aging is the largest risk factor for dementia.

Churches, already filled with older adults, will see more people affected by dementia. The church is uniquely positioned to bring the gospel to bear on the challenges of dementia. We have not been made in a spirit of fear but of power and love. We know that nothing—no illness—can separate us from the love of God. When Jesus invited Peter to walk on water, he wanted to see Peter's trust. We too are called to the promise of Jesus—that he will be with us. We can walk forward with dementia, or any other illness, with faith that God will sustain us always.

This good news can serve those with dementia and their loved ones. This is a devastating illness; losses start with something as simple as the telephone, then financial management, health care, home, travel, church, walking, possessions, feeding oneself, continence, friends, and family. As in ascetic practices, just when it seems everything is gone, there is yet another loss. The financial burden to the individual, family, and society is great. Isolation of the person with dementia and the care partner can lead to a spiral of loneliness and depression, which further exacerbates the negative symptoms of the dementia and can create illness in the care partner.

Embracing people with dementia in church demonstrates that the church includes those who have been pushed to the margins. It testifies that the church will stay true to its mission and ministry to the end of life. It says to every parishioner: You are welcomed and embraced, even with your frailties.

We all need to hear this. And the community is essential to help the person with dementia maintain, and experience, their valued presence as part of the whole body of Christ. Just as we stand in before God for infants at baptism, we need to stand in for people with dementia. ■

Janice Hicks, a former chemist, is a deacon candidate in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington and a chaplain-in-training. An Episcopal Evangelism Society grant supported her work on spirituality and dementia.

The Pope Makes a (Very) Long-Distance Call

POPE FRANCIS reaches to the margins. He's washed the feet of prisoners and homeless families. Like his Assisi namesake, he's hugged contemporary "lepers" and made common cause with garbage collectors. But I was still surprised when the pope made a 20-minute video call to the International Space Station in orbit 200 miles above the Earth.

Pope Francis wasn't the first pontiff to make that long-distance call—his predecessor did that in 2011. But tracking stars and gazing into the heavens have been part of Judeo-Christian tradition since God asked whether Job could "bind the cluster of the Pleiades or loose the belt of Orion" (38:31) some 3,500 years ago. Despite that unfortunate Galileo kerfuffle in the 1600s over the "heresy" of believing that the Earth revolved around the sun, the Vatican has operated state-of-the-art telescopes since 1582.

As an enthralled 5-year-old, I made a scrapbook about the



A tapestry based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by artist Camilian Demetrescu.

space station have years of experience as engineers, physicists, mechanics, and biologists.

No. Pope Francis pointed behind him to Romanian artist Camilian Demetrescu's tapestry inspired by Dante's last verses of *The Divine Comedy*: "My desire and will were turned ... by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars." As engineers and astronauts, he asked, what does it mean to call "Love" the force that moves the universe?

Aleksandr Misurkin, a pilot born in a rural Russian town near the Belarus border, answered by referencing *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (who was also a pilot), which he'd brought with him into space. Misurkin said he would willingly give his own life to save the plants and animals on Earth. "Love is that force that gives you the ability to give your life for someone else," he said.

Randy Bresnik, an Iraq war veteran born in Kentucky, told the pope, "What gives me the greatest joy every day is to be able to look outside and see God's creation a little bit from his perspective. People cannot come up here and see the indescribable beauty of the Earth and not be touched in their

souls. ... As we see the peace and serenity of our planet ... there's no borders, no conflict—it's just peaceful. And you see the thinness of the atmosphere, and it makes you realize how fragile our existence here is."

Joe Acaba, the first astronaut of Puerto Rican descent, had looked down on Hurricane Maria as it devastated the island where his parents were born. A few weeks earlier, Acaba's Houston home was flooded during Hurricane Harvey. Pope Francis asked Acaba about the danger of individualism and the importance of collaboration.

"It is our diversity that makes us stronger," responded Acaba. "By working together, we can do things much greater than we can do as individuals."

We live in a season of vanities, as the preacher says in Ecclesiastes, a season of spiritual emptiness masked by agitation and indignity. At the brink of a new year, what does

it mean to call "Love" the force that moves the universe? ■

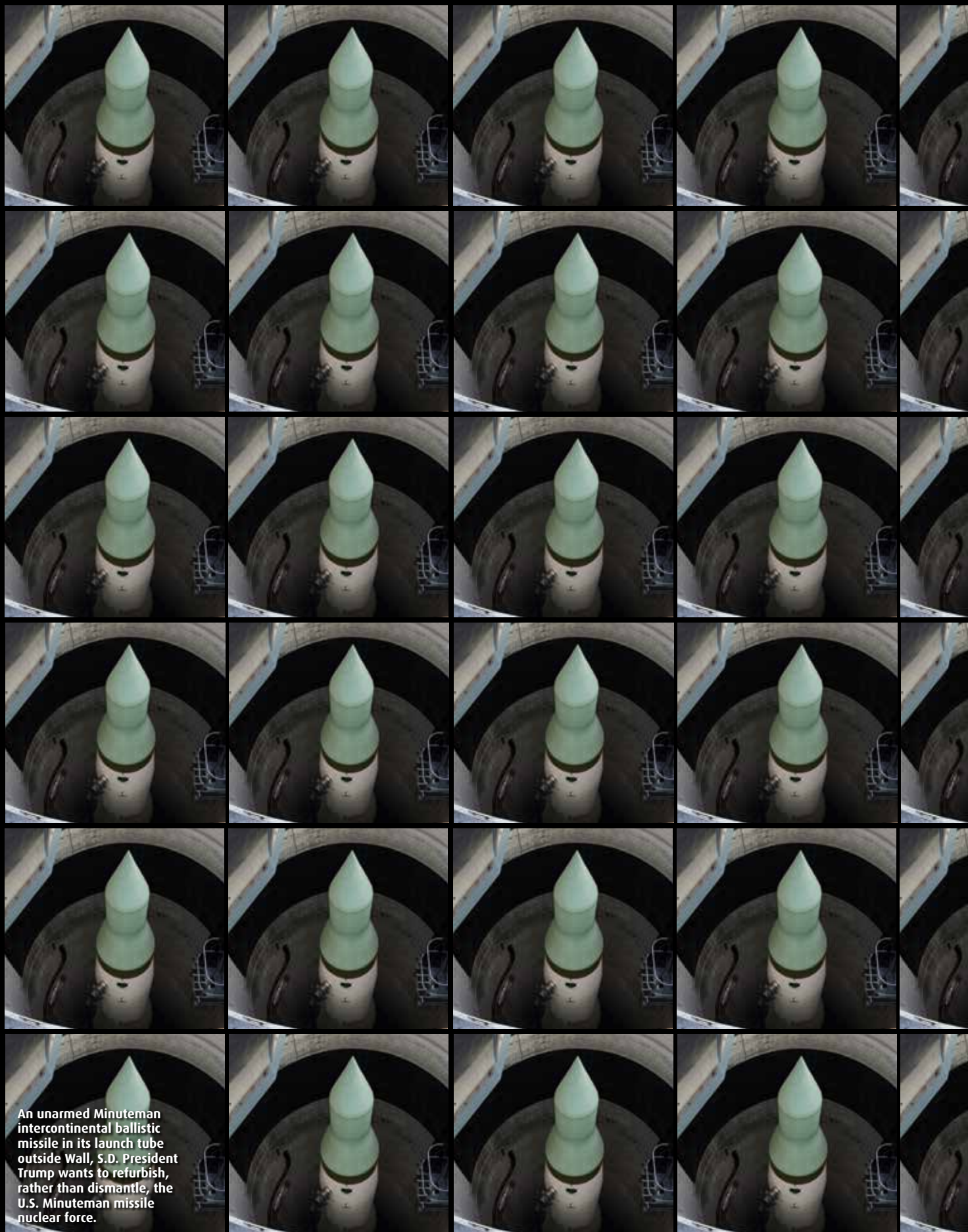


Rose Marie Berger, a Sojourners senior associate editor, is a Catholic peace activist and poet.

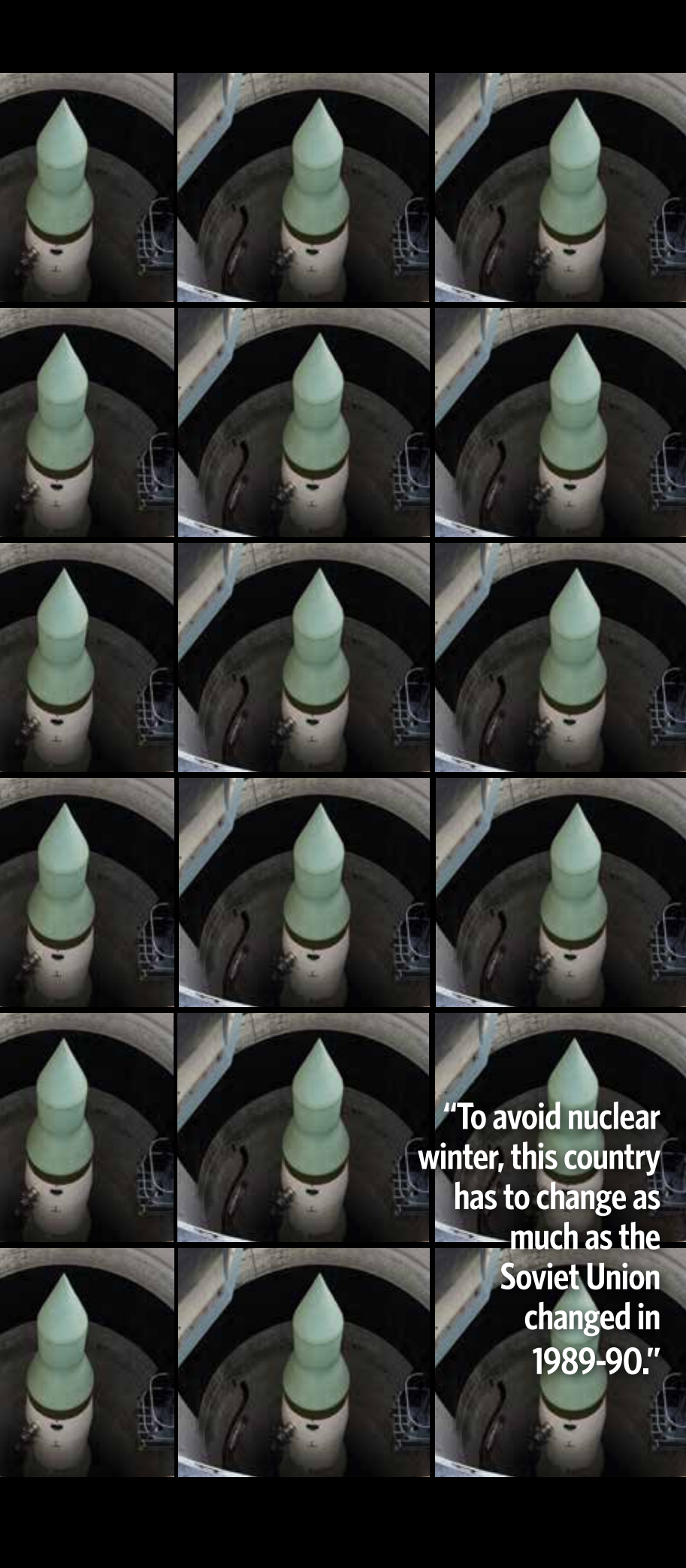
What does it mean to call "Love" the force that moves the universe?

Apollo 11 spaceflight that placed the first humans on the moon. As an 18-year-old, I marveled at the elegance of physics formulas that served equally well for measuring distances in cells and solar systems. At 54, I laughed out loud when I recognized Fibonacci's sequence in the passionflower we planted in the back alley. "The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God," wrote Pope Francis.

Did the astronauts and the pope talk about the logistics of spaceflight? After all, the pope trained as a chemist and the six men on the



An unarmed Minuteman intercontinental ballistic missile in its launch tube outside Wall, S.D. President Trump wants to refurbish, rather than dismantle, the U.S. Minuteman missile nuclear force.



'It's a Miracle We're Still Here'

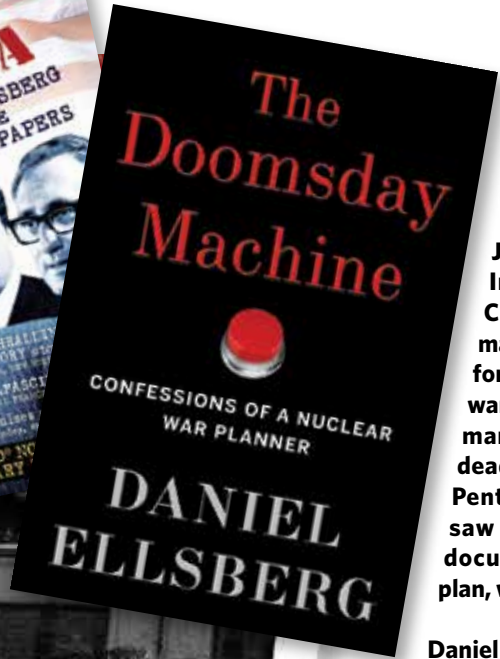
James W. Douglass talks with Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg about nuclear weapons and the fate of the earth.

DANIEL ELLSBERG was an analyst for the Rand Corporation when, in 1971, he leaked top-secret Defense Department documents about the Vietnam War to *The New York Times* and other media outlets. The publication of what became known as the Pentagon Papers demonstrated, according to the *Times*, that the government had "systematically lied, not only to the public but also to Congress" about U.S. actions in Vietnam and escalations of the war into Laos and Cambodia. Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers is a central focus of the Steven Spielberg film *The Post*, starring Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep, scheduled for wide release in early January.

In his new book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner*, Ellsberg returns to his whistleblower role as he reveals secret U.S. government plans for wide-scale nuclear war and decries Trump administration threats to rebuild U.S. nuclear-weapons stockpiles. Ellsberg and longtime Catholic peace activist James W. Douglass, author of numerous books, including *Gandhi and the Unspeakable: His Final Experiment with Truth*, talked this fall about nuclear weapons and the fate of the earth.

"To avoid nuclear winter, this country has to change as much as the Soviet Union changed in 1989-90."

Jim To Sculzo/European Pressphoto Agency



James Douglass:
In 1961, the Joint Chiefs of Staff estimated that U.S. plans for a general nuclear war would result in as many as 600 million dead. When you, as a Pentagon consultant, saw the Joint Chiefs' documents about the plan, what did you think?

Daniel Ellsberg: I thought that was the most evil plan that had ever existed. I knew it was not just a hypothetical plan for the future. It was for actual, alert forces that were used at that time, which was the year of the Berlin Crisis, a year before the Cuban Missile Crisis. We had a system of many parts, kept at the ready to kill more than a half-billion people. They would be willing to bring about the death of a third of the population of the world, because the total effect with Soviet retaliation would add several hundred million people. It's been my life's work ever since to lessen the probability that that will take place.

Were the Joint Chiefs accurate about the impact of nuclear weapons?

What scientists discovered in 1983 was that the smoke from the burning cities that we planned to ignite with our weapons would be lofted high into the stratosphere, where it would stay. It wouldn't get rained out. There it would block the sunlight. It would reduce the earth's temperature to a point that, in the summer, would be below freezing. All harvests would be destroyed. Nearly everyone on earth would starve. If they'd had that war any time during most of the Cold War, surprise! A year later, almost everyone would be dead—from the smoke, which [the Joint Chiefs] hadn't calculated.

Yet we are *still* maintaining a

Scenes from Daniel Ellsberg's life of protest and peacemaking: As "the most dangerous man in America," he exposed the lies behind the Vietnam War, and his new book, *The Doomsday Machine*, warns of the threat posed by nuclear weapons.

Associated Press photos

doomsday machine. So are the Russians. Two hair-trigger systems, ready for launch on warning, that could end life on earth. It's absolutely unconscionable, immoral, and insane to be taking this risk. We're the species that gambles with near-extinction. We've done it every day for the last 70 years.

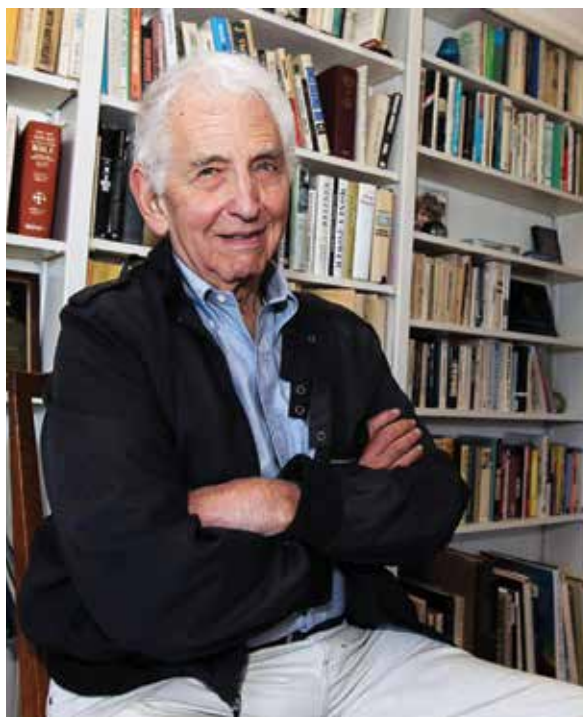
How do you respond to the reassurance that "no nuclear weapons have been used since Hiroshima and Nagasaki"? In fact, the leaders of the nine nuclear states find them useful and have used them, the U.S. more than others. They have used them in the way you use a gun when you point it at someone in a confrontation, whether or not you pull the trigger. You're obviously using the gun. Usually the intent is to get your way without pulling the trigger. That's the way we've used our nuclear weapons dozens of times, mostly in secret from the American public, although obviously not in secret from those who've been threatened—North Vietnam by Nixon, the Chinese in Korea by Eisenhower.

We have a president right now who is clearly invoking that threat. When he talks about "fire and fury such as the world has never seen," that suggests something even bigger than the two explosions on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It's a kind of madness. All the individuals concerned are smart, conscientious, patriotic, decent people with their families and pets. Nevertheless, they preside over a system that is insane and immoral.

You're describing what sounds like the setup in a classic film, Stanley Kubrick's dark satire *Dr. Strangelove*, which includes a "doomsday device." Did Kubrick get it right? I watched that film as a matter of business, during the working day in 1964 when it came out, with my friend and boss, [former Rand president] Harry Rowen. We went to see it because we knew it was in our area, war planning, not knowing what to expect. When we came out, I said to Harry, "That film is a documentary." He said, "Yes, absolutely."

A doomsday machine existed in fact as early as 1950—through the smoke [that would follow a nuclear attack]. Not the blast or the fire or the fallout, but the smoke in the stratosphere would starve nearly everyone



Daniel Ellsberg at home in Kensington, Calif., in 2017.

on Earth. That is still true. Yet we still retain more than 1,500 warheads on hair-trigger alert.

What must happen for humanity to survive? It will be a miracle if we get through another 70 years without setting these weapons off again on humans ... an explosion on a city. It will take a miracle for the transformation in the world to take place, a miracle for

"Hope is not just a feeling. Hope is a way of acting and a way of living."

another 70 years. But fortunately, miracles are possible: The downing of the Berlin Wall. Mandela in South Africa. The ending of the Cold War. All those were totally unforeseeable by any human calculation that we know of. It's a miracle that we're here.

For us to avoid nuclear winter, this country has to change as much as the Soviet Union changed in 1989-90. Is that likely? No, it's extremely unlikely. Is it impossible? No. Anybody who says it's impossible hasn't been around the last 40 years. Lots of people say it's impossible to stop climate catastrophe. It's extremely unlikely. But it's not impossible. And it's worth one's life to try to improve the odds on that. If it's 1 percent, it's worth your life to improve that to 1.5 or 2 percent, in my opinion. I'm talking in secular terms here now. But that's the way I see it.

It's what Chelsea Manning said, what Ed Snowden said, and what I said: "Without a

doubt, the public needs to know this. No one else is going to tell them. So I'll have to tell them."

You had to do whatever you could, nonviolently and truthfully, to bring it to an end, as in the Vietnam War. Without the draft resisters, the ones I actually met and saw, there would have been no revealing of the Pentagon Papers. That would not have happened without the example of people going to prison. It worked on me ... a chain reaction. I thought of what I was doing as a Gandhian

action of truth-telling.

You've gone from the doomsday machine to Gandhi. When somebody asked Gandhi about the atom bomb, he said that the effect on the people who dropped it is yet to be seen. I would say, 72 years later, we can say what the effect was: Horrible! A horribly dangerous effect. The way it was framed. The way it was described, a year or two later

especially: "We had to do it." It has had a bad effect on the people who dropped it.

What we're talking about now is transforming that, transcending that, and

changing that point of view. If I have a hope for this book, it would be to contribute to a changing consciousness that would move us in a different direction. But it has to be a radical change. As my friend Joanna Macy said, "Hope is not just a feeling. Hope is a way of acting and a way of living."

When we feel what's happening is intolerable, an unconscionable risk, we humans do have the capability of taking on that responsibility, acting to change it. The hope has to be for the unforeseeable chain reaction, something we don't even foresee is capable of doing that.

So, is it possible? Yes. The answer to Gandhi's question is: The effect on the people who dropped it was bad. And it's been bad ever since. But is it possible to change that? Yes. Gandhi showed the way—that it's possible to get a chain reaction in the other direction. And that's what we're up to. ■



Dear White Santa...

NOW THAT WE can say “Merry Christmas” again (Did we forget to thank you for this? Thanks. No, really. Thanks a lot.), I wanted to cut to the chase with my wish list this year. It’s short.

I would like a white people intervention. Please get as many white Christians—progressive and evangelical—in the same room for a cleansing flood of white tears, some deep breathing and healing prayer, and time to plan to dismantle white supremacy. As just one of several million Asian Americans,

tough conversations around the turkey and dressing about how divided this country is? Find out how many stayed for dessert and coffee and argued with the racist uncle or ignorant cousin? Make a list and check it twice for the white people who don’t just talk a good talk on social media, or at progressive conferences that talk about race and justice, but also speak truth to their white siblings, parents, and holiday guests? Could you do that for me?

We are getting close to the one-year mark of the inauguration, and I think being grateful that we haven’t entered into a war is too low of a bar. This intervention is for the white people who think they get it more than the other white people. I will leave it up to you to decide who is who. Black and brown people are still dying for being black and brown. Immigrants of color, documented and undocumented, are being reminded we are not American (code for white) enough. LGBTQ rights and protections are being chipped away and threatened, and those most often at risk of bodily harm are LGBTQ folks of color. It doesn’t seem to matter what year it is. 2017? 2018?

White Santa, I’m sure you know this, but it bears repeating. White people still hold so much of the power, stand as the gatekeepers, and run the show in politics, government, faith-based organizations, and the church. This woman of color is tired of being on their panels and in their conversations. I’m sometimes tired of having the honor and privilege of writing for their publications. (By the way, for the three most recent faith-based publications—one evangelical and two more progressive—all three of my editorial contacts are ... wait for it ... white.) My appearance does not level the playing field. My presence adds a single Korean American immigrant woman to their long list of leaders. Please tell them to talk it out, speak truth to each other, and console each other through moments of fragility and guilt. And then figure out how many of them are going to step down and go to white privilege rehab. Thank you. ■

This woman of color is tired of being on white people’s panels and in their conversations.

I can only do so much to keep educating white people about the system their ancestors—who did or did not enslave people or benefit from slavery (by the way, all Americans who aren’t African American benefitted from the evil of slavery)—created and continued to adapt and adopt.

Maybe you could call the Thanksgiving Turkey and take a roll call of how many white people had



Kathy Khang, co-author of More Than Serving Tea, is a writer, speaker, and coffee-drinker in the north suburbs of Chicago.



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By Menachem Wecker

Refuge for the Tempest-Tossed?

A Dutch art exhibit turns a church into a meditation on migration.

WHEN DUTCH ARTIST Sarah van Sonsbeeck sees photos of people wrapped in metallic emergency blankets and referred to as “migrants” or “refugees,” she’s disturbed by the way this reduces their humanity. “This abstraction, I feel, is very dangerous,” she says.

Van Sonsbeeck brought hundreds of gold-and-silver Mylar blankets to Amsterdam’s Oude Kerk (“Old Church”) for a site-specific installation last May to September. The exhibit reflected upon the church’s colonialist history and the ways that Westerners can be unwittingly complicit in migration. The last point troubled the artist from the start of her project.

“As I am not a migrant, am I even entitled to address this?” she asked herself, before realizing she too plays a role. “I belong to and am a product of the Western society the migrants are migrating to,” she says.

Just as Mylar blankets can obscure people’s humanity, van Sonsbeeck’s installation, which evoked ripples in a golden sea when the light hit off the Mylar, covered many of the 2,500 tombstones marking some 10,000 graves that make up the church floor. Some of Amsterdam’s most prominent business people, politicians, and military leaders are buried beneath the 13th century church, and Rembrandt’s wife, Saskia van Uylenburgh, is another renowned long-term resident.

Tourists hoping to catch glimpses of the city’s remote, entombed past may have been disappointed, but the meditation upon Holland’s present and future was just as powerful. Several works by Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum have involved marbles on gallery floors,

In artist Sarah van Sonsbeeck’s installation, emergency blankets are laid out on the floor of Amsterdam’s Oude Kerk (“Old Church”).

Menachem Wecker



one laid out as a map of the world with the expressed aim of having the viewer foot traffic necessarily distort the map; van Sonsbeeck's Oude Kerk installation accomplished the same thing. As visitors navigated around the Mylar, the golden blankets rustled and moved, sometimes folding themselves over and revealing their silver undersides. Other times they crinkled up. The blankets looked like they were alive and breathing, which made it all the more poignant when the work was "destroyed" and reshaped by inadvertent visitor interaction.

The Mylar, in addition to its use during emergencies, carries other symbolism for van Sonsbeeck. The blankets' golden hue, she says, references the value, holiness, and light to which society aspires. And the ocean-like effect the blankets created relates to the church's roots, as many of the bodies buried beneath its floor were sailors, who thought they were doing God's work as they colonized the new world.

Oude Kerk, which sits within Amsterdam's Red Light District, used to be

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one of the city's few public, covered places where people could mend sails and nets, and naval heroes were buried there, according to the church website. "The barrel vaulting was also fabricated like the inverted hull of a ship using shipbuilding techniques," the site adds. "And it is not for nothing that the main section of the church is traditionally known in Dutch as the 'schip,' or nave. In the church there are actually fragments of paintings that feature motifs found on sailors' tattoos."

These sailors of yore, however, had "a very problematic and often horrifically cruel relation to 'saving,'" van Sonsbeeck says. And beyond this church, which was devoted in

As visitors navigated around the Mylar, the golden blankets rustled and moved.

the 14th century to the patron saint of sailors and became Protestant in 1578 following the Reformation, van Sonsbeeck sees a broader "complex and problematic relation" that religion has had to "salvation." "It involves a hierarchy, making the one who is saved dependent on the rules, beliefs, and mercy of the savior," she says. "The savior puts his beliefs and rules above that of the one whom he is 'saving.'"

An installation like van Sonsbeeck's, which invites viewers to relate current events to their faith, can deliver particularly pointed critiques, David Brinker, assistant director of St. Louis University's Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, tells *Sojourners*.

"Here the artist draws on the history of the building itself and its relation to the community to inform her contemporary work," Brinker says. "The same work displayed in a gallery might still carry some of the same conceptual meaning, but would be diminished without the relationship to the church building."

In fact, he says, it's rare today for religious communities to commission art beyond what they require to furnish houses of worship or for liturgical purposes. "Perhaps congregations might connect with socially engaged artists as a means to reconsider, propose, and

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New & Noteworthy



Singer
Julien
Baker

FAITH IN THE DARK

Indie rock singer and Memphis native Julien Baker examines sexual identity, Christianity, and mental health in her latest album, *Turn Out the Lights*. Influenced by the Episcopal Church's *Book of Common Prayer*, Baker's album is a meditation on empathy and unity. Matador Records

MEMOIR OF SURVIVAL

Nadia Murad was just 21 years old when she was forced into the ISIS slave trade in northern Iraq. Now a human rights activist, Murad details her narrow escape in *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*. Tim Duggan Books

BROTHERHOOD BEHIND BARS

The Work is a gripping documentary that captures a group four-day therapy session inside a men's maximum-security prison. Raw and vulnerable, the film shows that redemption is not only possible but also a path to freedom. theworkmovie.com

DANGEROUS TRUTH

The subject of the film *Concussion*, Dr. Bennet Omalu, tells his own story of integrity and faith in *Truth Doesn't Have a Side: My Alarming Discovery about the Danger of Contact Sports*. Omalu's research on contact sports as a cause of brain degeneration challenges our sports culture. Zondervan

Embracing Art's Sacred Power

AMONG THE MANY hopeful initiatives to come from the Vatican under Pope Francis is an attempt to rebuild the church's relationship with the arts. Francis declared this to be among his priorities in his famous 2013 interview with Jesuit priest Antonio Spadaro (published in the U.S. by the journal *America*). Francis listed among his inspirations painters Caravaggio and Chagall, the Russian novelist Dostoevsky and the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, the music of Bach and Mozart, and the films of Fellini and Rossellini.

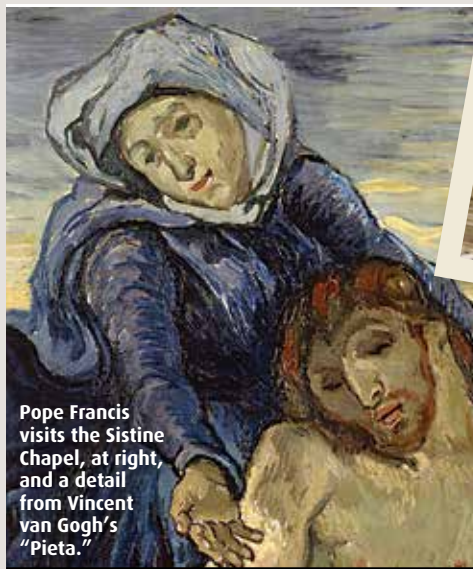
Lately the pope's passion for art has taken tangible form with an interview-based book in Italian, whose title translates to *My Idea of Art*, and a documentary film of the same name, subtitled in six languages, that tours the Vatican Museum's artistic treasures. In the book, Pope Francis argues that great

Pope Francis maintains that “a work of art is the strongest evidence that incarnation is possible.”

art can serve as an antidote to contemporary greed, exclusion, and waste and maintains that “a work of art is the strongest evidence that incarnation is possible.”

Pope Francis came to office determined to downgrade some of the papacy's pomp and splendor. He lives in a guest house instead of the papal apartment. He wears sturdy black walking shoes instead of those iconic red slippers and a silver cross where his predecessors went for the gold. He seems like the sort who might auction off the Vatican's art collection and give the money to the poor.

But Francis instead sees the church's involvement with the arts, past and present, as an occasion for



Pope Francis visits the Sistine Chapel, at right, and a detail from Vincent van Gogh's “Pieta.”



and it all clicked. That apparent idol worship was, as Pope Francis reminds us, expressing a faith that rests on the incarnation. It's a faith in which grace builds on nature, and the invisible

evangelization. In *My Idea of Art*, he states his desire to have the doors of the Vatican Museum thrown open to all without charge. (The current admission fee is about \$18.) This would be right in line with a papacy that has seen shelter near St. Peter's Square opened to the homeless—who were then the guests of honor at a 2016 Vatican concert.

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church and art, especially visual art, should be a match made in heaven. It once was, and not just for the likes of Michelangelo. Well into the 20th century, the church kept less distinguished artists busy turning out the gallery of devotional objects that every parish church required: the crucifix, the stations of the cross, the statues of the Holy Family and the local patron saint, and all those stained-glass windows.

During my Southern Baptist childhood, it was darkly insinuated that Catholics worshipped idols. All that religious art provided proof. You could see them any day of the week, kneeling in front of a sometimes-garishly painted statue. Then, in my late teens, I started reading Dorothy Day,

God works through the sensual elements of bread, wine, water, and oil.

Spurred by Vatican II, the art in Catholic churches changed, not always for the better. The updates, especially of religious art and music, tried to reflect the church's new openness to the secular world and modern ideas. It was all very well-intentioned. But the results sometimes put me in mind of bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson II's comment about his backing musicians on his 1960s tour of England. “Those British boys want to play the blues real bad,” Williamson said, “and they do.”

Pope Francis, however, seems to know great art when he encounters it and understand its theological significance. Maybe he will rebuild the bridge between Christianity and contemporary artists. That's asking a lot, but this is the guy who invited Patti Smith to play at his 2014 Christmas concert. I'm willing to give him a chance. ■

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.



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embody the tenets and wisdom of their faith traditions in new, provocative, and effective ways," he says.

The subject of van Sonsbeeck's work—immigration, migration, and refuge-seeking motifs—have long punctuated sacred stories of all the major world religions.

"These stories and their exegesis bring out the richness and complexity of those human experiences," Brinker says. "The Exodus of the Israelites, for instance, is not only about seeking liberation from political, social, and economic repression in the face of military threat, but also about survival in alien circumstances, establishing and maintaining a collective sense of identity, and the tension of hoping for welcome in the face of frequent rejection or worse."

Contemporary religious art, according to Brinker, can anchor the stories and teachings in the present. "The power of a visual representation to shape a person's response in the very moment the story is recalled is considerable," he says. "A representation of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as Syrian refugees could bring together the tradition and the viewer's current experience in ways that might be forced or clumsy expressed in prose."

And art can also have the advantage over political speech of being able to pose questions while simultaneously leaving room for viewers to respond with their own questions, according to Brinker. "Genuinely religious or spiritual art is not merely didactic, but generously leaves space for the viewer's own response," he says.

And van Sonsbeeck is very respectful of that space for viewers to add their own reflections.

"Some loved the 'gold' for shiny selfies; some felt the migration issue was addressed, either praising it or being horrified by it for various reasons; and one American gentleman even thought the church was being reconstructed!" she says. "However, this work has spoken to many people, and for that I feel truly blessed. It's not often that art evokes so many personal feelings and thoughts, and that is, in the end, what I hoped for." ■

Menachem Wecker is a freelance reporter based in Washington, D.C. He holds a graduate degree in art history from George Washington University.



From *Avatar*

THIRD WAY MOVIE-GOING

"WHERE DID WE get this capacity to imagine that horribly complicated messes have been ironed out just because someone has looked us in the eye and told us so? I don't know about you, but I keep getting it from the movies." So says novelist Jim Shepard in his provocative new collection of essays on movies and making the American myth, smartly (and depressingly) titled *The Tunnel at the End of the Light*.

In Terrence Malick's *Badlands*, Shepard sees sociopathy at the root of the desire for celebrity. He also reflects on how *Saving Private Ryan* was a "war movie found pleasing by conservatives and liberals, and it's not hard to figure out why: ... more than enough war is hell to satisfy the left, and ... an even greater helping of well, it may be hell, but it sure brings out the best in us, doesn't it? raw meat for the right." Shepard makes a useful point—something can be remembered by one group of people as the antithesis of how another sees it.

Of course, all movies are interpreted in the eyes of the beholders, and the motivations of their creators may not bear on the audience's experience. You can watch *Avatar* and see an anti-colonial adventure or a recruitment poster for the myth of redemptive violence, a winsome invitation to attend to Indigenous wisdom or a condescending advertisement for spiritual

practice as a fashion accessory.

I like *Avatar* because it invites identification with underdogs, and does so with extraordinary visual imagination, recognizing that cinema's power rests largely in how the images move (or don't). I don't like how it offers no alternative to the use of force to get rid of oppressors. Large-scale moviemaking finds it hard to apply the same levels of creativity to storytelling and moral complexity as they do to visual spectacle, and not only because of the (assumed) risk of box office failure. Walter Wink wrote that in a world utterly used to the deployment of force to bring order out of chaos, nonviolence needs to be rehearsed.

It's much easier to imagine something we've seen before, so those of us who value a third way beyond fight or flight must champion stories that will help us imagine it. Call it third way movie-going.

Shepard calls himself "an apocalyptic," meaning he tends to think that things are going to get worse first. But his book isn't without hope: It serves as an invitation to learn from wise lament. We aren't here just to be entertained, but to change how we live. ■

Gareth Higgins is an Irish writer and founder of moviesandmeaning.com and www.irelandretreats.com.

Reviewed by David F. Potter

BECOMING WHOLE

The Sacred Enneagram: Finding Your Unique Path to Spiritual Growth, by Christopher L. Heuertz. Zondervan.

THE SACRED ENNEAGRAM infuses a centuries-old personality typing system with an often-neglected perspective: grace and compassion. With nuance and genuine curiosity, Christopher L. Heuertz moves beyond personality caricatures common to many writings on the Enneagram and explores the complexities of being fully human. Rather than type-calibrated condemnation, Heuertz' insights extend affirmation, hopefulness, and an invitation to self-liberation.

A sacred map to the soul, as described by Heuertz, the Enneagram illumines a journey of discovering our true self beyond false identities upheld by "self-perpetuating lies." This transformation begins with an honest awakening to how we have invested in one of nine identity illusions and continues as we begin to relinquish our defense of this surface-level version of ourselves. Through self-observance and "empathetic detachment," we cultivate the gifts of mental clarity and emotional objectivity and increase our capacity to reflect the essential nature instilled within us. In this slow conversion toward embracing the *imago dei* within, we return to God.

Interwoven throughout this work is the wisdom of master spiritual teachers. Thomas Keating's "three programs for happiness"—in which happiness requires an integrated balance of security and survival, affection and esteem, and power and control—is brought alongside Henri Nouwen's "three lies of identity": I am what I have, I am what other people say or think about me, and I am what I do.

Heuertz overlays these time-tested ideas with elements of the Enneagram: intelligence centers, in which our dominant way of perceiving the world filters through either the head center (thinking), heart center (feeling), or body center (instinctive) and the harmony triads, in which the dominant way we relate to the world is either as pragmatists, idealists, or relationists. Here emerges the true gift of Heuertz' offering to this typology and to spiritual formation

broadly: contemplative prayer postures and intentions outlined specifically for each Enneagram personality.

There has been a recent wave of Enneagram fascination, particularly within Christian circles. Heuertz positions this psychospiritual hunger within a larger return to the contemplative tradition. Grounded in disciplines of silence, stillness, and solitude, *The Sacred Enneagram* outlines prayer intentions of engagement, rest, and consent intended to facilitate a gentle corrective to the misguided and often harmful passions and ego-fixations each type clings to. For those thirsting for healing and wholeness, the contemplative discipline offers a deep well of spirituality that "calms the body, stills the emotions, and quiets the mind."

While many typology enthusiasts are satisfied with understanding the *what* of behavioral quirks, Heuertz examines the *why* undergirding our varying human experiences. The trajectory of personal growth, he writes, moves from obtaining basic knowledge to principled understanding to embodied integration. Ultimately, the gift of the Enneagram is to empower those committed to spiritual growth to find an integration point that holds the fullness of ourselves. Approaching this system of knowledge through a framework of contemplative spirituality "invites us to resist the reductionism of inner fragmentation; to realize we aren't as bad as our worst moments or as good as our greatest successes—but that we are far better than we can imagine and carry the potential to be far worse than we fear."

Those seeking a quick overview of their own personality type may find *The Sacred Enneagram* overwhelming and perhaps a little intimidating. Some of Heuertz' exploration of psychoanalytic psychology can be quite dense, with a high terminology learning curve. However, the depth of information combined with Heuertz' narrative storytelling effectively moves the reader from simply

receiving a soothing personality balm to empowered consideration of how they are most sensitized and responsive to God's presence.

Centered in our essential nature, what Heuertz describes as "the home for our souls," we can hear and discern the voice of God. Here, rehumanized and trusting the very goodness flowing within us, we return home to the embrace of a God who is love. ■

David F. Potter is the special projects manager at Sojourners.

Reviewed by Dhanya Addanki

GENERATIONS OF STRENGTH

You Bring the Distant Near, by Mitali Perkins. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

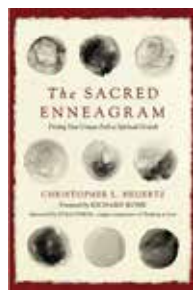
THIS IS A BOOK I wish I could have had when I was 15.

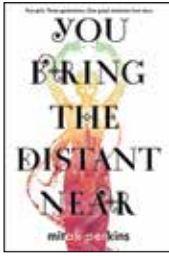
While there are numerous (and much needed) stories about the immigrant experience, Mitali Perkins' young adult novel, *You Bring the Distant Near*, fully captures nuances of relationships, racism, death, family, feminism, sexism, and love in profound ways. It's a story that's not often told with such clarity and depth.

Reading this book was like staring into a mirror and seeing my reflection—sometimes surprised, sometimes in tears, and other times nodding in understanding.

It weaves together the lives of five women from three generations—Ranee, Tara, Sonia, Anna, and Chantal (nicknamed Shanti)—and focuses on Tara and Sonia's journey from when they were teenagers to when they were mothers with successful careers.

Ranee is a strong-willed, stay-at-home, Indian (Bengali) immigrant mother who comes to the U.S. with her husband for opportunity. She is the mother of Tara and Sonia. Tara is charming, peacemaking, and theatrical in the best ways. She is a shape-shifter of sorts, able to fold into any culture by studying and learning what traits she needs to be the most ideal version of that culture (when she arrives in the U.S. she emulates Marcia Brady). Sonia is fiercely intelligent, outspoken, and a brilliant writer. Anna is Tara's creative, brazen daughter who





is proud of her Indian roots. Shanti is Sonia's athletic and easygoing daughter who loves math and dance.

Each woman represents a different side of femininity that together shows the reader the importance of multiple, empowering narratives.

The novel alternates first-person narration from each woman, which together with other characters' observations provides fragments from which we can form a whole, humanizing picture of each character. For example, for Anna, Chantal is a perfect example of an intelligent, beautiful all-American woman. She describes her as an "American goddess." But as we look at the world through Shanti's eyes, we see her struggles as a biracial (her father is black) woman in the U.S.—she doesn't feel black enough around the black community and doesn't feel Indian enough around Indian communities. We see some of the discrimination she receives from the Indian community as well as her struggles to appease her black grandmother and her Indian grandmother, an analogy of her attempts to balance both of her identities as equally as possible.

The genius of this book is how Perkins uses language. We can almost hear the accents, the anger, the strength, and the sweetness in each woman's voice. It feels as if we are reading their minds.

This book beautifully fluctuates between light and heavy. Perkins isn't afraid to tackle hard issues, but keeps the story hopeful enough that readers can leave with their faith intact or even restored. It shows women as the complex people that they are. It makes no excuses and shows young readers how to stand up for what they believe. And for all young South-Asian girls, including a 15-year-old me, it shows us that our stories matter, and empowers us to live gracefully, balancing the cultures that we hold so dearly.

It's a story of home, of family, of choosing between traditions, of love, and of the multitudes of identities represented in America. It's a story that is crucial to the heartbeat of this country and its ever-evolving identity in this world. ■

Dhanya Addanki is associate web editor for Sojourners.

EXCERPT

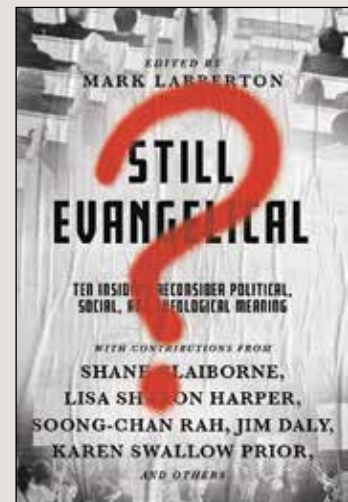
BLINDED BY FALSE VICTORIES

AMERICAN CHRISTIAN exceptionalism focuses on a narrative of success and victory. When suffering occurs, it's considered a hindrance to the work of God in the world. The narratives of suffering communities, therefore, are ignored or removed from the dominant narrative of triumph. Stories of successful church plants and growing megachurches with huge budgets are front and center in how we tell the story of American evangelicalism.

Spanish-speaking storefront churches embody a profound, faithful spirituality in the midst of suffering. However, for many white evangelicals looking for the next magic formula to grow their churches, these churches may be deemed too small and even "illegal." Many Korean American immigrants gather at five every morning to pray at their church before embarking on a 12-hour workday. But this expression of spirituality may be ignored among the latest evangelical church fads, because it is spoken in a foreign language or in English with an accent. Native American Christian communities that offer spiritual rituals to the heart of disenfranchised Natives are perceived to have exotic pagan practices that are syncretistic and are inferior to the rich tradition of services such as those of Taizé. African-American evangelicalism is considered an inferior brand of evangelicalism, with its emphasis on justice and race issues discounting its leaders from key positions of leadership.

Nonwhite expressions of U.S. evangelicalism, therefore, are often portrayed as inferior to the successful formula for ministry put forth by many white evangelicals in mainstream U.S. Christian culture.

Self-perceived exceptionalism coupled with an unholy pursuit of triumphalism emerges from a dysfunctional theological imagination among U.S. evangelicals that perpetuates an increasingly dysfunctional religion in a diverse world. Despite this, white evangelicalism clings to the assumption that its worldview and cultural engagement is the appropriate and non-negotiable one. ■



From an essay by Soong-Chan Rah in Still Evangelical? Ten Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning, edited by Mark Labberton. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426, www.ivpress.com.

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Reviewed by Christina Colón

TUNED TO TROUBLE AND FAITH

Wendigo, by Penny and Sparrow.
Single Lock Records.

IT'S BEEN A YEAR of unease. Neo-Nazis, hurricanes, and threatening tweets sent by orange-tinged fingers have left me wondering, "What's next?"

Wendigo, the latest album from indie folk duo Penny and Sparrow (Andy Baxter and Kyle Jahnke), didn't answer that question for me. Rather, their somber melodies provided something I didn't realize I needed—space to confront the uncertainty.

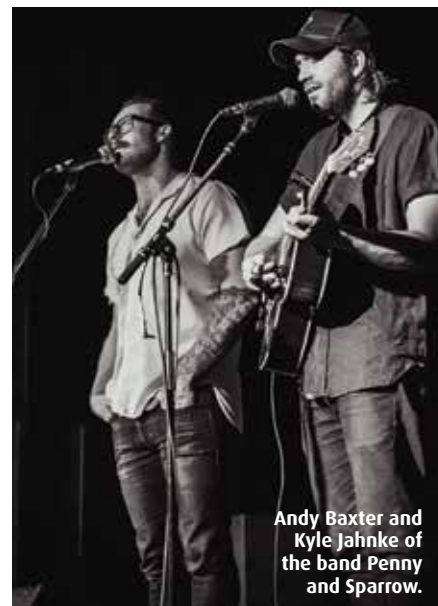
According to Chippewa poet Louise Erdrich, the wendigo "is a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside of it." Some Indigenous communities see environmental destruction, exclusion, and greed as indicators of "wendigo psychosis."

Many wendigos seemed to appear after the 2016 election. Not just in the White House, but also in families, friends, and neighbors. The song "Kin" calls to mind Thanksgiving dinner with pecan pie and family members-turned-strangers. "Where the hell did your spine go? / Did you cut it out? / Did it never grow?" the lyrics ask.

A delicate marriage of science fiction and biblical references, *Wendigo* has been baptized in darkness. An initial listen left me feeling unsettled. Yet hearing it for a second time revealed that my anxiety had already been present; Penny and Sparrow's haunting harmonies simply coaxed it into the light.

Baxter and Jahnke talked with *Sojourners* about the inspiration behind their album. Baxter, co-lead vocalist and lyricist, referred to *Wendigo* as immersion therapy. "Lyrically, a lot of the record is a study of things that most of us are scared of," Baxter said, "trying to look at them earnestly and see whether or not it's worth being scared of them in reality."

The songs "Part 1 Visiting," "Part 2 Smitten," and "Part 3 Moniker" are written from the perspective of what scares Baxter—death. While Baxter often envisions death as the grim reaper, here he portrays death with a startling softness. "Now you know that I'm incapable / of choosing who to visit, how to do it, even when I can go," death states in "Visiting."



Andy Baxter and Kyle Jahnke of the band Penny and Sparrow.

"I'm just like you / I bend the knee."

This juxtaposition of light and dark on *Wendigo* is what ultimately sets the record apart. It's clear that Penny and Sparrow's faith informs their songwriting. Not just in overt references such as "Salome & Saint Procula," but also in the gentle way they interact with the unlikely protagonists of their songs.

"Javert" is a painful conversation between God and the Javert of *Les Misérables*. A man of law and order, Javert feels incompatible with a God of grace. "You require that 'no work is due' / How can it be?" Javert calls out. "Is there room in Your home for a man that feels prone to fall through?"

Wendigo, like Javert, does not have a reassuring ending. The final song, "The Carmike," fades abruptly. "Saying 'I don't know' / There's no shame in it / Or I'm lost I'm lost I'm lost," Penny and Sparrow breathe into the mic.

Penny and Sparrow may have used *Wendigo* to become more intimate with the things that trouble them, but those whispered words make me believe that this album is also a cry for self-reconciliation. In a time when it feels that the church and the world are demanding a plastic happiness, *Wendigo* reminded us that wholeness also involves lamentation. ■

Christina Colón is an editorial assistant of Sojourners.

anna, the first evangelizer

my marriage of seven years
so long ago now that i am eighty-four
yet as if it were yesterday—
 the white canopy spread
 its bellowing white wings over love
with his death the temple became my home
so many pilgrims have come and gone
winter spring ... days eased themselves
into my flesh like prayers softly chanted
i have my favorite spaces, corners, nooks
where i stand invisible
as if i have breathed myself into stone and shadows
today they came
 he with tallit shoulders
 she with a child
and my heart leapt as old hearts do
when seeing youth and life
i, too, was young again with love
then fading into the crowd
i would be the first of all those who would share
rejoice! the Promised One is here

Lou Ella Hickman is a member of the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament of Corpus Christi, Texas. Her most recent collection of poetry is titled she: robed and wordless (Press 53).

Getty Images

The Church of Another Chance

THE NEW YEAR OFFERS an opportunity to take stock of ourselves and our intentions for our own well-being. Radical attempts at self-reformation often end in frustration, including attempts to develop new spiritual habits. This month's texts hold a up a series of mirrors in which we can assess ourselves and see perhaps that we do not need to be wholly reinvented. The Spirit who weaves through the early texts is present at creation and through the life of Jesus, and she remains to guide us.

Whatever the new year brings, we will not face it alone. In the second week, we have an opportunity to speak frankly about sexual misconduct or choose to preach different aspects of the lessons. The new year offers an opportunity to do the hard work of community, protect the vulnerable, and hold accountable those who violate sacred trust. We do so knowing the Spirit does not shrink from the subjects from which we shrink. She will be there with us through the difficult work. Likewise, the third week's readings offer an opportunity to do the hard work of repenting and asking forgiveness before we try to be reconciled to those whom we have wronged. This is particularly important for people who hold power and in reli-

gious settings where pressure is often put on those who have been wronged to forgive before they have begun to heal from their injury—or while they are still being harmed. The final lections invite us to sit and stand in awe of God and treasure the knowledge that comes from those postures.



Wil Gafney is an associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.

[JANUARY 7]

God's Voice

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

PRAYING IN THE new year is a staple of African-American Christianity. No matter how challenging or sorrowful the past year, the new one, bathed in prayer, is entered as a fresh, hopeful, beginning. This week's lessons present beginnings that are full of hope, though they are also attended by sorrow. Genesis 1 marks the beginning of our world (if not the beginning of all things), the

Greek, and it was centuries before Latin introduced masculine pronouns for the Spirit.) In Mark, she bears witness to her beloved son and is promised to those who are baptized. In Acts 19, the promise of the Holy Spirit appears to have been hindered by an inadequate baptism, the baptism of John rather than the baptism of Jesus. When the group was properly instructed and baptized in the name of Jesus, the Spirit poured out on the little band with dramatic evidence. (A cynical or uncharitable reading might see Paul being presented similarly to Jesus and John—right down to the 12 disciples—to establish his credibility.) In these three texts, the Spirit is powerful beyond measure and at the same time tenderly loving and immanently present.

God's voice unites Psalm 29 with Mark 1. In the psalm, God's voice is the orchestra of creation: rumbling thunder, crashing waves, and the crackle of lightning and fire. The power of that voice can peel the bark off the trees and shatter them into splinters.

In Hebrew, the Spirit and her verbs are feminine.

beginning of Israel's story, and the beginning of our scriptures. Mark 1 is the beginning of the written gospel tradition and bears the beginning of the ministries of John and Jesus.

The Spirit of God unites Genesis and Mark. She flutters like a mother eagle over the world she has birthed in Genesis 1:2. And yes, she is a "she." In Hebrew, the Spirit and her verbs are feminine. (They are neuter in

That voice bathed the world in parental pride when Jesus received his baptism. God's voice still speaks in wind and water and her Spirit still bathes the baptized.

[JANUARY 14]

Blasphemy

1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;
1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

BLASPHEMING GOD. First Samuel 3:1-20 presents God's judgment against Eli's sons given to the young Samuel as though God could not bear to tell Eli what would become of his sons. Missing from the lectionary portion are the crimes for which they were condemned. First, they pilfered the offering: 1 Samuel 2:12-17 describes how they stole from the portions of the holy offerings meant for God alone, even though they were entitled to their own portion. Most churches deal swiftly with financial misconduct, which is rarely so bold as directly pocketing offerings.

The second transgression begs our attention. In 1 Samuel 2:22, Eli's sons are accused of what we now call clergy sexual misconduct: "they lay the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting." The Hebrew is missing the preposition "with" (NRSV renders it "they lay with the women"), one indication that the sex was not consensual; further, the women are not condemned for violating Israel's sexual norms. Clergy sexual misconduct—rape, coercion, misuse of trust and authority that comes with the office—is the contemporary analog for the behavior of Eli's sons.

Hearing the words of God's judgment against the perpetrators here is instructive: "I [God] have told him [Eli] that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them" (1 Samuel 3:13). What raises their conduct from transgression to blasphemy is knowledge of the abuse and the lack of intervention. This indictment convicts many contemporary churches, ministries, and religious institutions where clergy and other leaders are known to violate sacred trust and permitted to continue.

First Corinthians 6:13, 15-16 also addresses inappropriate sexual behavior: use of sex workers and *porneia* (which is

unhelpfully translated “fornication”; both words are from the same root). *Porneia* is sexual immorality in broad terms; it includes prostitution, adultery, marriage to an inappropriate person, premarital sex—particularly by a woman—sexual excess, or transgressing sexual cultural norms in any way. The task remains for communities to determine, define, teach, and enforce appropriate sexual norms.

[JANUARY 21]

Repent, then Reconcile

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

GOD CHANGES her mind about punishing the Ninevites, in Jonah 3:10, contradicting other verses that declare that God does not, in fact change the divine mind: The Glory of Israel will not recant or change *zir* mind (*zir* is the genderless pronoun used for God in 1 Samuel 15:29, Jeremiah 4:28, and Psalm 110:4), for God is not a mortal that God should change God’s mind. According to Jonah, God can and will change her mind but not on behalf of the Israelites, who are often presented as God’s chosen or even God’s only people.

God is moved to rewrite her own rules on behalf of the Assyrians, who conquered her own people and whose brutality and viciousness were legendary. (The Assyrians preserved images of themselves peeling the skin off their captives and carving them to the bone while yet alive.) The Assyrians didn’t even worship Israel’s God!

Jonah presents a scenario in which the people of Nineveh are convicted by a prophetic proclamation, see the error of their ways, and repent. This text has been useful in the past to talk about engagement with people designated as enemies, especially since Nineveh was in what is now modern-day Iraq, with whom the U.S. has fought two wars. The text is also useful for exploring calls for reconciliation between peoples with a history of violence between them.

People who benefit from hierarchy—white, heterosexual, cissexual—often move from injurious conduct to pleas for reconciliation couched in religious language, exerting a nonsubtle pressure. Those calls

neglect the real work that needs to happen before reconciliation can be considered. Jonah models that work.

There is an outcry; there are consequences for actions. Jonah, the minoritized (and we should read: subjugated) person, is listened to and heard by the dominant culture. The people of the dominant culture repent. They don’t offer carefully crafted nonapologies to protect themselves from legal action; they repent. Their change is visible and demonstrable. Then, and only then, God in her mercy reverses herself and spares them from reaping the consequences of their actions.

[JANUARY 28]

It’s a Process

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111;
1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

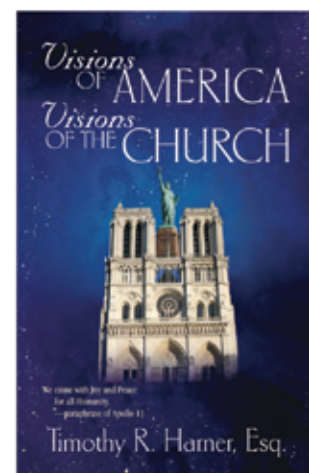
“GOD-FEARING” seems like a description from a bygone era. Psalm 111:10 teaches that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (as does Proverbs 9:10, while Proverbs 1:7 says “the beginning of knowledge”). These texts are a reminder that one does not *arrive* at spiritual wisdom, knowledge, or understanding. It is a process. The psalm goes further and says we must work at being God-fearing, “all those who practice it have a good understanding” (verse 10). The fear of God isn’t about fright or a fear of God’s authority and power to punish or harm; it’s about reverence and awe. That reverence comes from knowing God.

The awe-inspiring knowledge of God in Psalm 111 stands in sharp contrast to the knowledge Paul critiques in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul is talking about those who have religious, perhaps theological, knowledge that others do not have or do not understand. He does not condemn that knowledge but critiques those whose display of their knowledge endangers the faith of those who do not share that knowledge. The specific context—whether Christians could eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol, then served in a variety of public and community events (think block party)—may not have a contemporary analog. But the issue of differing types or levels of understanding does have contemporary parallels.

The two groups in 1 Corinthians 8 can

be understood as those with and without theological training, or with and without any kind of specialist knowledge. With that understanding the text can be heard as a caution to be thoughtful about how matters of faith are engaged in the public square. Alternately, the two camps in 1 Corinthians 8 can be read as those with (religiously) conservative and progressive understandings. A limitation of these readings is the ease with which this text can become biblically sanctioned anti-intellectualism, grounds for rejecting any new or theologically challenging ideas. What seems to be missing here is any engagement between the two groups, however they are understood. With all the “knowledge” in this passage, there is no sharing of it, no sign of relationship between the groups. ■

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Dog Days (plus cat)

WHEN I WAS a young man, colds were minor annoyances, though less annoying than colleagues responding to every sneeze with an automatic “God bless you,” despite lacking the ecclesial authority to do so. (What, you’re pope now?) Colds were temporary things, easily overcome by the strong immune systems of youth, and I never stayed home from work.

But having a cold now is like being targeted by one of Obama’s Death Panels, which apparently selected me for demise; at least that’s how it felt for the five straight days I spent in bed. My immune system was elsewhere—perhaps volunteering at a local charity—and it took its sweet time pulling me through.

Trying to remain positive, even with a productive cough (a pleasant medical term meaning “projectile phlegm,” as disgusting as it is difficult to spell), I realized that staying in bed for days should be seen as an opportunity, and not a waste. After all, the Chinese character for “opportunity” is a guy standing next



to the store, can you pick up more Sudafed Right? I still have enough of the Left.”) Why is the scientific community leaving this up to me?

■ **Tormenting the cat.** Granted, this need not be limited to sick days. In fact, it can be a gratifying part of *any* day that one is alive on this earth. But laying sick in bed allows sufficient time both for planning—and savoring—a job well done. In this instance, I simply wiggled one foot under the covers, just enough to attract the cat’s attention. When it pounced, I quickly raised the other foot, reshaping the original flat surface of the bed into a suddenly unscalable, mountain-like peak. This surprised the cat who, unable to change direction in mid-air, was sent sliding back to the floor in a jumble of writhing paws and tail. This filled me with mirth, but it also led to a five-minute fit of coughing with an already-tender throat. (Worth it.)

But spare me your “poor little kitty” responses. This cat was already bringing attitude when he entered the room, haughtily wondering why he must compete for surface areas on a weekday. Setting him straight was an important part of my healing process.

■ **Watching a new golden age of scripted television.** Although, as a sick person, one must be particularly cautious when viewing

comedies. Laughter hurts the throat. Doctors recommend serious dramas or cloying romances when suffering from a bronchial condition, nursing a cracked rib, or recovering from a recent vasectomy. Laughter, in those cases, is the worst medicine.

■ **Spending time on Facebook,** where one reconnects with old friends and loved ones—some with Russian heritage—embracing the rich tapestry of relationships in our lives. Unless there is a Wayfair ad. Who needs friends and loved ones when you can buy that *incredible* Cortina Sleigh Bed (above), and it’s only \$3,170! For discriminating shut-ins who insist on being bedridden in Old World luxury, your sleigh awaits. (“Come find me, kitty!”)

EVENTUALLY, of course, I felt better, and returning to work was its own reward. The suffering was soon forgotten when I was surrounded by appreciative colleagues who barely contained their joy at my return. They may have said, “Oh, you were gone?” But their moist eyes proclaimed, “We missed you!” And discovering that my office had been turned into a storage area only reinforced my sense of worth to the organization. It’s good to be back. (I’ll just check my secret candy drawer and ... J’Accuse...!) ■

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of Sojourners.

I fought the cold, and the cold won.

to what looks like an outhouse next to a coffee shop, which makes no sense, so never mind. But a week of home recovery *did* give me time to do the things I’ve long postponed because of the demands of family and career. Such as:

■ **Staring at the ceiling.** Admittedly, some might scoff at the limits of such an endeavor, but for legendary underachievers like me, it is a practice ripe with possibility. I see cracks up there that need attention, but which I will neither caulk nor paint. An important task never accomplished is a satisfying end unto itself.

■ **Thinking up new advancements in health care,** such as nostril-specific decongestants. (“If you’re going

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